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## **Roots of women's union activism: South Africa 1973-2003**

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**Roots of Women's Union**

**Activism:**

**South Africa 1973-2003**

**Cynthia Malehoko Tshoaedi**

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# Roots of Women's Union Activism: South Africa 1973-2003

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## Acronyms and abbreviations

|          |                                                              |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------|
| ANC      | African National Congress                                    |
| ANCWL    | African National Congress Women's League                     |
| COSATU   | Congress of South African Trade Unions                       |
| CCAWASA  | Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers of South Africa      |
| CEC      | Central Executive Committee                                  |
| CEPPWAWU | Chemical, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union    |
| CWIU     | Chemical Workers' Industrial Union                           |
| DP       | Democratic Party                                             |
| IFP      | Inkatha Freedom Party                                        |
| FAWU     | Food and Allied Workers' Union                               |
| FEDTRAW  | Federation of Transvaal Women                                |
| FOSATU   | Federation of South African Trade Unions                     |
| NALEDI   | National Labor and Economic Development Institute            |
| NEDCOM   | National Education Committee                                 |
| NEDLAC   | National Economic Development and Labor Council              |
| NEHAWU   | National Education, Health and Allied Workers' Union         |
| NOB      | National Office Bearers                                      |
| NOW      | Natal Organization of Women                                  |
| NUM      | National Union of Mineworkers                                |
| NUMSA    | National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa              |
| NUTW     | National Union of Textile Workers                            |
| PPWAWU   | Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union              |
| POPCRU   | Police, Prisons and Civil Rights Union                       |
| SACCAWU  | South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union |
| SACTU    | South African Textile Union                                  |
| SACTWU   | South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union            |
| SADTU    | South African Democratic Teachers' Union                     |
| SAMWU    | South African Municipal Workers' Union                       |
| SARHWU   | South African Railway and Harbor Workers' Union              |
| SATAWU   | South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union            |

|      |                                      |
|------|--------------------------------------|
| TGWU | Transport and General Workers' Union |
| UDF  | United Democratic Front              |
| UWO  | United Women's Organization          |
| WNC  | Women's National Coalition           |

**To my mother Nomthandazo and my late father Mothobi**

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# South African women's struggles against racial and gender oppression

## Introduction

Trade union mobilisation by African<sup>1</sup> workers in the early 1970s and 1980s is regarded as one of the most significant worker uprisings in the history of South Africa's industrial relations system. It was during this period that fractures within the apartheid system emerged. It was also in this same phase that processes that led to the eventual downfall of apartheid were set in motion, first by the workers, followed by students and then communities, opposing the apartheid political system. The protests initiated by workers resulted in events that led to the transition process and the eventual democratisation of South Africa in April 1994. Trade union mobilisation during this period is therefore an important part of South Africa's history.

For the most part, the history of trade union organisation in South Africa has emphasized the roles played by men in the mobilisation and building of the trade union movement. Analyses of trade union struggles during this period make little reference to the initiatives and leadership of women in workplace struggles for

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<sup>1</sup>Apartheid policies classified South Africans into four different racial groupings, African, white, coloured and Indian. In the early 1970s the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) countered this racial ideology by defining all the oppressed groups as black (African, Coloured and Indian). These classifications have been used interchangeably during the apartheid period and in the post apartheid period. In this research, I use black to include the three racial categories as defined by the BCM, and African as an exclusive category that refers only to one racial group under the apartheid classification.

trade union mobilisation. Women often get but a cursory mention<sup>2</sup> and their involvement in the labour movement as activists receives less acknowledgment. Baskin (1991), for instance, has written on the history of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and workers' struggles in the workplace. The book highlights the roles of various male leaders and their contributions to the building of the labour movement. Only one chapter in the book discusses women, focusing on their status as victims of gender discrimination in the workplace and the unions.

In writing about the strikes of the early 1970s and 1980s and the emergence of the South African trade unions during this period, the gender aspects of these strikes and the involvement of women in the strikes is rarely highlighted. The academic language used in analysing these events excludes the demands and interests of women as part of working class politics. Scott (1988), comments about labour historians' neglect of women or gender issues in analyses of the labour movement. She argues "most however ignore gender entirely, insisting either it is absent from their sources or that (unfortunately) women played only a minor role in the working class politics that mattered (Scott, 1988:55).

Similarly, scholars such as Pardo, (1998) Phillips, (1991) Scott, (1988), Jones and Jonasdottir, (1988) have underscored the sexism and bias in political theory and its analysis of politics and political actors. Often, the conceptualisations are dominated by male bias that obscures the role and participation of women as significant political actors (Jones and Jonasdottir, 1988). The conventional view of politics and political action has often been based on the view of these arenas as rational and less influenced by individual's values or personal subjectivities. Such conceptions have excluded the activities and involvement of women in political organisations like the trade union movement (Briskin, 1993 and Fonow, 2003).

With the emergence of women's studies as a focus for scholars in South Africa in the early 1980s, some women writers paid attention to the experiences of working class women in trade unions and the workplace. For instance, Barret (1985) and Lawson (1992) have highlighted experiences of gender discrimination suffered by working class women in the workplace and in the trade unions. Both studies also focus on the unequal power relations within the family and how these relations impact on women's decisions to be active in trade union matters. Berger (1992) has also conducted an in-depth study into the organisation of women in trade union activities in the South African clothing, textile, and food industries from 1900 to 1980. She focuses on the class-consciousness of working

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<sup>2</sup> See for instance Sithole and Ndlovu (2006) and Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006). Forrest's (2005) recent book *ASIJIKI, A History of SACCABU*, which is a female dominated union, does not place much emphasis on the role and contributions of women (except for the mention of Emma Mashinini as the founder) in the building of the union.

women who organized into Garment Workers' Union of the Transvaal (GWU) and the Canning Workers' Union (FCWU). Berger's research is useful in terms of demonstrating women's organisation and mobilisation in trade union activities in South Africa's early history of trade union organisation. The research also highlights the bias in the conceptualisation of the concept of class-consciousness.

This present study examines the active involvement of women trade unionists within COSATU<sup>3</sup> (the successor of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU)) in the organisation and mobilisation of workers in the workplace between 1973 and 2003. I argue that women activists were also in the forefront of workplace struggles and trade union mobilisation during the early 1970s and 1980s. The objective is to highlight African women's agency within one of the most powerful social movement organisation in South Africa.

In carrying out this task, I explore the experiences of women in the South African labour movement from their personal or subjective experiences (Scott, 1988). Therefore, in interviewing women about their role in the trade union movement, I focus not only on workplace issues, but other issues outside the workplace that impact on their activism as women. These women activists' lives and experiences do not begin and end in the workplace. I acknowledge the different contexts in which women exist, and that the experiences within these various contexts inform their consciousness and social actions (Pardo, 1998; Scott, 1988). Within these different contexts, women assume different identities that also impact on their challenges, and how they respond to these challenges.

Life stories research methods were used to gain biographical information of women activists. The data gathered is critical in demonstrating the different struggles that women address in various social settings. Firstly, this research shows that workplace mobilisation of these women cannot be explained by looking only at the workplace. Their awareness of racism and apartheid domination in society informs their mobilisation. Secondly, this study argues that the development of gender consciousness among women trade union activists interviewed is a process that occurs over a period of time, and it is influenced by an individual's interactions in different social settings. Because of their gendered observations in various sectors of society, most women activists join the workplace and the trade union movement aware of gender inequalities and gender discrimination.

The workplace and trade union activism offers opportunities for these women to organize as a collective gender group and identify issues of particular concern.

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<sup>3</sup> COSATU is one of the largest and most influential labour movement in South African politics. COSATU's size and power in the workplace has enabled its affiliates to play a meaningful role in workers' struggles in the workplace and the national politics. The dominant impact of COSATU and its affiliates in the workplace and South African politics makes it important to examine the mobilisation and activism of women within COSATU unions.

The collective organisation of women in COSATU trade unions (through gender structures) from the 1980s was initiated with the prime objective of challenging gender inequalities, male domination of the labour movement, and changing the agenda of the unions so that it reflects the interests of women union members. The struggles of COSATU women activists indicate that labour movement processes, are affected by gender struggles over power and access to public space. This research further underscores the importance of different opportunity structures in the different periods in which trade union women activists challenged gender inequities. The social, political, and economic changes in the context are significant in explaining the different strategies women adopt to address issues of gender domination during the period under study.

In analysing the participation of South African women during the transition process and their gendered impact on the constitutional process, most analysts have focused on political organisations. The influence of trade union women activists in this process has not been given adequate emphasis. Interviews with COSATU women activists, however, indicate that trade union women's participation (with a large working class constituency) is essential in the studying of transition processes from the women's perspectives.

In its assessment of the transition process, this research shows further that struggles for power and influence over the definition of collective interests are not only between women and men, but can also be observed amongst women of different classes, race groups, and political ideologies. This research argues that the discourse of COSATU women was reflected during the transition process. It further points out that COSATU women activists had a meaningful impact on this process in terms of influencing the women's movement discourse on the definitions of working class women's rights and interests.

The research objectives of this study, therefore, are the following:

- To investigate the mobilisation of women into trade unions during the period 1973 through to 2003. In this investigation, the socio-political environment in which most women activists are embedded is considered as central in the development of their working class consciousness.
- The research will also observe the processes involved in the development of gender consciousness amongst women by focusing on their experiences within the workplace, society/home and the unions. The aim is to assess how these experiences shape their consciousness of gender inequality at various levels and the extent to which that has influenced their gender activism.

- Women's activism within trade unions and their demands for gender equality, and how they define their activism will also be explored. This will be done through assessing various campaigns and the debates that women raised about gender inequalities within the labour movement from the mid-1980s through to the early 1990s. The research will also offer women's own explanations for their activism and assess the extent to which we can actually link this activism with feminism.
- The early 1990s is an important period in women's struggles in terms of influencing the transition process as well as the constitution making process in South Africa. The research will assess COSATU women's role in this process through its participation in the Women's National Coalition. I will further examine the extent to which COSATU women represented the working class interests within this forum, and how they used their influence in the federation (COSATU) to advance the rights of women workers in workplace legislation.

The following sections review literature on South African women's studies and the political participation of women in organisations during the apartheid period and the transition to democracy.<sup>4</sup> Firstly, I show that most of the early commentators on women's political organisation and activism characterized their actions as conservative, and therefore not directed at transforming patriarchal gender relations in society. These conclusions are largely drawn from the focus on the family and gender relations as the primary site in women's experiences of patriarchal oppression. These analyses have excluded an examination of the gender discrimination that women experience as a result of apartheid laws in society and in the workplace. Their analyses, therefore, fail to regard struggles at this level as challenging patriarchal relations of domination. Secondly, I discuss women's political organisation during the 1980s, and argue that their activism challenged gender specific issues, such as sexual violence. Lastly, this chapter will discuss the literature on the transition process in South Africa.

### South African women's struggles against pass laws: did women defend or challenge patriarchy?

Throughout the history of South Africa's liberation struggles women have engaged in and led protests against various government laws that impacted

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<sup>4</sup> In analysing women's activism in South Africa, most of the literature refers to the national liberation movements, which includes the trade union movement. Activism in the trade unions has often been regarded as part of the national liberation movement.

directly on their rights as full citizens of South Africa.<sup>5</sup> Challenging the stereotypical beliefs about women's traditional roles, women initiated actions to challenge laws that affected their fate.<sup>6</sup> In these protests, as it will be shown in the discussion below, women acted in contradiction to their assumed submissiveness and engaged in actions that their male counterparts at times dared to initiate (Gasa, 2007).

In spite of women's long involvement in political struggles, it was largely in the 1970s and 1980s that South Africa witnessed an emerging interest in the writing of women's history by academics.<sup>7</sup> Frates (1993:28), however, observes that even with the recent flourishing of African women's history, when one compares it with the larger body of work on South Africa, one finds a paucity of literature specifically devoted to the role of women as political actors.

One of the most noted and remarkable protests by women in South Africa has been their resistance to the pass laws.<sup>8</sup> The pass laws, for most of the colonial period, had applied to African men with the object of controlling and channelling labour supply to different sectors of the economy (Luckhardt and Wall, 1980). The first attempt to extend these laws to African women was in Bloemfontein in 1912.<sup>9</sup> This was met with resistance by women who feared that these laws would not only restrict their free movement, but their economic activities would also be severely affected. Due to the government's restrictions on African women's formal employment, many of these women were engaged in various informal economic activities. These activities included brewing African beer for sale, selling cooked meals outside factories, sewing and knitting, and selling their products within their communities and outside industrial centres to which the pass laws denied them access (La Hausse, 1988).

Women also engaged in domestic labour in white suburbs. According to Wells (1986:256) women had more bargaining power; they could command higher wages and better terms of employment due to the domestic labour shortage in the area. Thus the introduction of the pass laws in this instance was an attempt by white authorities to erode the freedom and power women had over their labour and working conditions (Wells, 1986).

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<sup>5</sup> In his analysis of women in urban protest movements, John Nauright (1996:260) notes that women exhibited a militancy that undermines the accuracy of earlier explanations suggesting that they participated in spontaneous, unorganised uprisings or that local male leaders manipulated them.

<sup>6</sup> Men showed their disapproval of women's actions against the government. For instance, during the 1913 protests against pass laws "Dr Abdul Abdurahman scolded women 'for acting on their own and not consulting their leadership' (Wells, 1993 cited in Gasa, 2007:135), while Sol Plaatje cautioned women that they were entering into a complex and dangerous arena' (Gasa, 2007:135).

<sup>7</sup> See Hetherington (1993).

<sup>8</sup> The pass laws specified who qualified to be in the urban areas. All Africans were required to carry passes that proved they were employed, that they had a permit to live in the city where they worked, or that they had a permit to seek work (Luckhardt and Wall, 1980:299).

<sup>9</sup> For more details on these protests see Gasa, (2007) and Wells, (1983 and 1986).

Topping the list of white complaints about the servant problem was the desire to prevent workers from changing jobs, to compel servants to sleep-in on the employers' premises and to keep servants much more reserved. In other words whites wanted limited job mobility, longer working hours and no complaints about working conditions (Wells, 1986:256).

After women had made several attempts requesting the local authorities and national government to review its decision to extend the pass laws to women, they decided on more drastic action. In May 1913, after a year of sending petitions and delegations to the national government and local authorities, women marched to the local police station where they tore up and burned their passes (Wells, 1983). Marching to the mayor's office, women shouted, "... we have done with the pleading, we now demand ..." (African People's Organisation newsletter June 1913, cited in Gasa, 2007:136). Although women were arrested, their actions were successful in suspending the pass laws in the area. During the protests, with many women being arrested for refusing to carry passes, women formed their own Orange Free State Native and Coloured Women's Association (as opposed to relying for support on the South African Natives National Council or the African Political Organisation, which were male dominated) to raise material aid for the resisters and their families, and to advocate the cause for general public support (Wells, 1983:57). Wells further points out that it was through the efforts of the women's association that the campaign gained publicity and the public's support, resulting in the suspension of the pass laws.

Since the successful protests in 1913 against the pass system, the requirements for pass permits excluded women. This was set to change when the apartheid government of the National Party (NP) was voted into power in 1948. Upon assuming power, the NP introduced a set of laws aimed at tightening control of African labour and their movements within urban areas (Callinicos, 2004). In 1955, the government announced its intention to extend the pass laws to African women (Wells, 1983).

The reaction of women to this announcement should be analysed within the context of apartheid in the 1950s, which was characterized by intensified racist laws and oppression against Africans (Gasa, 2007). African resentment of the political context and their treatment under apartheid rule influenced mobilisation and organisation against the set of laws that were being introduced. The African National Congress (ANC) adopted the Defiance Campaign in 1952 in response to

these new laws (Callinicos, 2004).<sup>10</sup> According to Wells (1993:105) from the early 1950s, women actively participated in community organized protests (such as the bus boycotts) and political campaigns. Referring to the Defiance Campaign, she points out that women were often particularly ardent supporters of the campaign (Wells, 1993:103).

Although the Defiance Campaign did not last long,<sup>11</sup> it “had created a new mood of black confidence and assertiveness” and activated the notion of “popular militancy” (Callinicos, 2004:185). In April 1954 women held a conference in Johannesburg where they launched the Federation of South African Women (FSAW). With the formation of FSAW, women criticized “the refusal of large sections of our men folk to concede to us women the rights and privileges which they demand for themselves” (FSAW Women’s Charter, April 1954, cited in Gasa, 2007:213). The conference organized under the theme “to fight for women’s rights and for full economic citizenship of all” (Wells, 1993:106) adopted the Women’s Charter. Some of the aims set out in the Charter included:

The right to full opportunities for employment with equal pay and possibilities of promotion in all spheres of work; equal rights with men in relation to property, marriage and children, and for the removal of all laws and customs that deny women such equal rights (Walker, 1982:159)

Women’s opposition to government’s plans and protests against the pass laws during the 1950s took place against this background. The new pass laws threatened their citizenship rights and access to centres of economic activity. Furthermore, the government’s proposal entrenched a patriarchal ideology that legalized the subordination of African women. It restricted the qualification for pass permits for women born outside the cities, making it dependent on an association with a male figure. Single women did not qualify for pass permits as they were required to “produce the pass of a ‘male guardian’ before they could obtain their own” (Wells, 1983:68).

Anyone born in the city qualified; as did daughters under the age of sixteen and wives of men in legitimate wage employment; so did women who were themselves in wage employment, but only as long as they continued to work. People who had worked for one employer for ten years or those who had worked steadily for different employers for fifteen years also qualified (Wells, 1983:67).

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<sup>10</sup> From June 1952 groups of Africans in various parts of the country engaged in various acts of defiance. For instance, Callinicos (2004:184) points out that in Port Elizabeth a group used the whites-only entrance to the railway station.

<sup>11</sup> In response to the Campaign, the government introduced a new law that made it illegal to protest against existing laws... The Campaign was called off after police shootings and deaths of several protesters in four different parts of the country (Callinicos, 2004:184).

In the march to Pretoria in August 1956, the family was placed at the centre of this protest, with women highlighting the detrimental effects that the extension of these laws would cause (Wells, 1993). The anxieties of women about these pass laws were raised by their observations of the harassment experienced by African men. As well as harassment on the streets by pass officials, raids on homes and arrests for pass permits were carried out randomly at night (Gasa, 2007). Women had witnessed many incidents of the state's intrusion in their family lives. They had also witnessed the humiliation and degradation to which African men were subjected during these raids (Gasa, 2007).

The framing mobilisation (which has focused on the family and women's roles as mothers) during the pass protests has received much criticism from South African scholars (such as Wells, 1993; Walker, 1982; Hassim, 1991 and 2006). Paying close attention to the frame mobilisation, analysts during the 1980s and early 1990s characterized the pass protests as 'conservative', and reinforcing gender defined roles (see for instance Mentjies, 1998; Posel, 1991b; Walker, 1991 and Wells, 1983; 1986). Adding to her criticism of the 'conservativeness' of women during these protests, Wells (1983:69) argues that:

It was essentially against full proletarianisation. In both cases (referring to the 1913 and 1956 protests) the resistance proved to be strongest among those women who had achieved a balance between responsibilities to family and generating income.

Wells' (1983) conclusion fails to take into account the context of the labour market discrimination during this period. The South African government restricted the employment of African women in the formal labour sector. Thus in the early 1950s, for women, full employment opportunities were limited.<sup>12</sup> The few women, who had formal employment, were often subjected to discriminatory practices in the workplace, and were more likely to lose their jobs than their male counterparts. The pass laws meant that many women would have difficulties meeting the requirements for obtaining pass permit without a husband or male guardian. As it turned out, these laws prevented many women from accessing centres of economic activity.<sup>13</sup>

The introduction of pass laws was a threat to women's means of earning an income, since their economic activities required movement outside their designated areas. The resistance to the pass laws therefore, should not only be regarded as women's attempts to protect their families or to be with their husbands in urban areas, as is implied by analysts of these protests (see Walker,

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<sup>12</sup> See Posel (1991a:172) for discussion on African women and access to labour markets during the 1950s and early 1960s.

<sup>13</sup> Scanlon (2007) and Callinicos (2007) provide stories of individual women's struggles with pass permits and access to the urban areas.

1982 and Wells, 1986 for instance). They should also be perceived as women's early attempts to resist government's control over their economic activities and their labour. These were women's early attempts at challenging their exclusion from active participation in wage labour. They also indicate struggles about access to formal institutions such as the labour market. Gasas (2007:214) adds that their struggles against the pass laws, which were a tangible way of infringing their rights, was in fact a struggle to be in the public domain at the same time as it was a struggle for free movement.

African women's mobilisation on the basis of motherhood reflects the significance of this identity for this group of women. However, their struggles against the apartheid state do not suggest a lack of gender consciousness or being unaware of the unequal gender relations with men or within the family. In 1954 when FSAW was formed, women stated clear intentions to challenge unequal gender relations between women and men. Women criticized the allocation of gender roles within the family, where women bore domestic and childcare responsibilities (see Walker, 1982). In fact, the participation of women in political struggles opened the opportunities for questioning of societal norms and gender relations. For instance, after the women's demonstration in 1956, Tambo (the late President of the ANC) made a comment on the need for men to "fight constantly in every possible way those outmoded customs which make women inferior and by personal example must demonstrate their belief in the equality of all human beings, of both sexes" (cited in Callinicos, 2004:224).

Women's resistance to government's policies in the 1950s also reveals women's political consciousness and agency in challenging the apartheid authority. This is more evident in the 1957 women's protests against Prime Minister Verwoerd's government's attempts to depose Chief Molema of Dinokana (a community in Zeerust, in the North West) for opposing government's order to issue passes to women in his area. Women came out in support of their chief and protested against the government. The women of Dinokana protested and refused to carry passes. They mounted a campaign both to support their chief and also to protest against the 'handling of women who fell into the hands of police' (Gasa, 2007:226). According to Walker (1991), the resistance was not easily crushed. Hundreds of people crossed the border into what is now known as Botswana instead of succumbing to the pressure of carrying passes. In 1958 *Drum* magazine (cited in Walker 1991:207) quoted a woman protester arguing, "I have had to hide in the fields and hills many times like an animal. We decided to flee the Union rather than have passes."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> However, in spite of highlighting this evidence Walker still concludes that this opposition was "bound up with conservative defence of traditional institutions – chieftainship, the patriarchal family, established sex roles. The women who defied the reference book units were not demonstrating

Some of the women's struggles in the 1950s challenged the sexism in the government's policies. In 1959 when the government introduced the betterment schemes<sup>15</sup> in the rural areas of Natal, many women suddenly lost access to land. In the reallocation of land only heads of households were eligible (Walker, 1991). The government's definition of household obviously excluded women, and this is what women challenged in 1959 when they protested against the schemes.<sup>16</sup>

By taking initiatives and leading protests, women have challenged the stereotypes of "the black woman who through centuries had been viewed by the white state as ... totally dependent on her male counterpart, as helpless, unintelligent to the point of being useless and stupid ..." (Kuzwayo, 1996:14). Hassim's (1991:69) assertion that these struggles were "located within the context of a broader national liberation struggle and appropriated as part of that history ... rather than within the history of black women..." underemphasizes the contribution of these struggles in challenging gender discrimination. These earlier struggles are a significant part of the history of women's struggles in South Africa.

*"I opened the road for you, you must go forward"* (cited in Kimble and Unterhalter, 1982:33) is a statement made by the late Dora Tamana in 1981.<sup>17</sup> As Tamana's statement suggests, the earlier struggles laid the basis for the future generations, and are the key to understanding the active participation of South African women in trade union organisations (and political organisations) from the early 1970s and beyond. According to Cherry (2007:286) "... young women activists ... consciously drew on their [veteran activists'] political history..." These veteran activists offered informal talks and workshops with younger women activists in the 1980s, where they retold stories about "...the historic role

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consciously for freedom or equality, one of the strongest reasons why women were opposed to passes was that they were seen as a direct threat to the family" (Walker, 1991:208).

<sup>15</sup> As outlined in the 1936 Native Trust and Land Act and other legislation, betterment was designed to transform the pattern of land use in the reserves by dividing rural locations into residential, arable and grazing units, fencing off grazing camps and fields, and grouping homesteads together into village-like settlements. In most areas where attempts were made to implement these schemes, resistance was encountered from the people affected, who came to associate the schemes with loss of livestock (through culling), restrictions on the use of grazing, and reductions in the availability of arable land. Throughout the reserves, betterment was rejected because...it was associated with economic hardships and deprivation (McAllister, 1989:346).

<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note that here again Walker reaches a conclusion which disregards women's agency in asserting their right to land ownership. She concludes, for the most part, as in Zeerust, the Natal women were acting conservatively in defence of an eroded way of life. The betterment schemes destroyed traditional patterns of settlement and threatened women's tenuous access to land (Walker, 1991:232).

<sup>17</sup> Dora Tamana was a leading figure in the mobilisation and organisation of women from the early 1950s. She was also a leading figure in the Federation of South African Women and participated in the pass law struggles (see Kimble and Unterhalter, 1983; Scanlon, 2007).

of women in opposing the extension of the pass laws in 1956” (Cherry, 2007:286).<sup>18</sup>

In her research in the Natal Organisation of Women (NOW), Hassim (2006:66) characterizes veteran activist women as a “socially conservative constituency” that drove away younger activists. On the contrary, Cherry (2007:284) describes the tactful and strategic leadership of these women in the organisation of the Port Elizabeth Women’s Organisation (PEWO) (in the Eastern Cape) in the early 1980s.

The early women’s struggles have provided generations of women in South Africa with a history and culture of activism and fighting against violations of their rights. It is this culture of protest or resistance that has developed over the years that South African women have come to rely on in their fight against injustices in the workplace and in society.

...Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or ‘tool kit’ of habits, skills and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action’ (della Porta and Diani, 2006:73).

## A critical review of South African studies of African women and patriarchal oppression within the household

In reviewing the literature on the struggles of African women and gender issues in South Africa, one comes across unfair, biased and racist analyses.<sup>19</sup> African women are described as “...weak subordinated female population” (Bozzoli, 1983:155), “conservative” (Walker, 1991; Wells, 1986; Hassim, 1991 and 2006) and therefore lacking the potential to develop a gender consciousness, or to even challenge the patriarchal nature of the gender relationships (Campbell, 1991; Bozzoli, 1983). The conclusions made by some academics are “no socialism, or indeed feminism is likely to arise from people engaged in these kinds of

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<sup>18</sup> Yearly commemorations of the 1956 march against the passes are also used to transfer knowledge of this significant event. The slogan of the march ‘*You have tampered with the women, you have struck a rock, you have dislodged a boulder. You will be crushed*’ is often recited during these commemorations to highlight women’s courage and determination against apartheid and gender oppression.

<sup>19</sup> The issue of racism in South African research and studies on gender was made clear at the 1991 Conference on Women and Gender in Southern Africa held in Durban. The conference highlighted several issues of racial and power dynamics within research and studying of women’s gender experiences in South Africa. Black women (including academics and activists) objected not only to the domination of white women in research, but also their failure to address their own racial subjectivity (see Letlaka-Reinert, 1991:21). The conference also highlighted the discomfort of African women in being presented as objects of research in academic theorizations (for different perspectives on the debates see de la Rey, 1997; Bazilli, 1991; Horn, 1991; Lund, Ballantine, Letlaka-Reinert, and Hofmeyer, 1991; Sheffer and Mathis, 1991).

relationships for a long time to come” (Bozzoli, 1983:167). The conclusions further create an implicit suggestion (and in some cases explicit) of sexism and patriarchal oppression as intrinsic to African culture.<sup>20</sup>

In her analysis of urban African families, Campbell (1991) refers to the dominance of a patriarchal ‘township ideology.’ Within this ‘ideology’ “women do not regard themselves as oppressed” (16). She further points out that the assigned gender roles of men being recognized as heads of households and figures of authority are dominant within African townships, even in households headed by a single female. Campbell’s research is based on “interviews conducted during the pilot phase of the Natal Project” (21); her analysis however suggests that these findings apply to all African townships in South Africa.

Her use of the ‘township ideology’ fails to acknowledge that each local setting has its own particular culture, history and belief systems that will impact differently on its subjects. Notions of patriarchy and gender oppression may vary amongst women in Natal townships and even for women in other townships like SOWETO in Gauteng or Khayelitsha in Cape Town. This notion of ‘township ideology’ presents African women as a “singular monolithic subject” (Mohanty, 1991:51).

An example that challenges Campbell’s conclusions is that of Jabu Ndlovu, who was from one of the Natal townships known as Imbali (Fairburn, 1991). She was a shop steward of NUMSA and a community leader. Due to her political activism within the United Democratic Front (UDF) and COSATU, which were both aligned to the ANC, she and her husband were killed during the political violence in Natal in 1989. In a book that recounts her life story through interviews with her children, relatives and colleagues, it is shown that Ndlovu was far from being a submissive woman without any gender or political consciousness. Upon joining the trade union in her workplace, Ndlovu,

... told her family that now that she was a union member as well as a worker, everybody would have to share household tasks ... so that Jabu would be free to take up struggles at Prestige ... in Jabu’s house, there were no rules for what boys should do or what girls should do. Jabu’s sons had to learn their way around the kitchen... Linda [her son] had a good example in his father. Jabulani [husband] also used to like cooking and often helped with the housework (Fairbairn, 1991:26-7).

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<sup>20</sup> For the past four years of working on this thesis I have never managed to finish reading this article due to its racial and cultural bias and offensiveness. However in the final year of writing my thesis I decided to read the article in full. This is largely because it is one of the most cited articles on women’s studies in South Africa and some academics regard it as ‘pioneering’ (see for instance Posel, 1991:9). I still find this article offensive and I am surprised that I have not come across any writing that challenges Bozzoli’s racial bias.

Campbell's conclusion that African women are victims who are not even aware of their gender oppression raises questions about the conceptual tools used, and the extent to which they enable us to probe deeper into the gender relations within the family. Is it possible that if the conceptual tools were not largely influenced by the biased perception of African women as victims of patriarchal domination and oppression within the family that the results would have been different? "All knowledge is constructed ... answers to all questions vary depending on the context in which they are asked and on the frame of reference of the person doing the asking" (Ruddick, 2004:162). According to Posel (1991b:19) "...history only answers the questions which we put to it – questions based on certain theoretical assumptions regarding the sorts of structural factors..."

In a widely cited article, Bozzoli (1983) analyses the forms of patriarchy within South African society, and argues that there are various forms of patriarchies in the country. The forms of patriarchal domination experienced by *African women* differ from that of '*Boer*' women. To illustrate her argument, Bozzoli contrasts the position of '*Boer*' women within this patriarchal domination with the subordinate and oppressed position of African women. She argues that '*Boer*' women, who were freed from agricultural production, were "socially more powerful (within patriarchy) than her black counterpart" (152). She goes on to argue that, unlike Africans, Afrikaner women were not forced into wage labour by the migrant labour system. On the contrary, their departure from the rural areas preceded that of their male counterparts. On this basis, Bozzoli argues that the "Boer society lacked the capacity to subordinate the labour of its women – perhaps a reflection of greater female strength" (154).

In examining the position of African women, she notes the patriarchal control by men as heads of households within peasant families. Citing the Carnegie Commission Report, Bozzoli attempts to show the different power dynamics within the 'poor white' and 'native' families.

Farmers give preference to native labour (over bywoners (tenant farmers)) and advance various reasons for so doing. Many have repeatedly found poor white disappointing as farm labourer. Besides, the farmer can often avail himself of the services of the native's wife and children to a far larger extent than in the case of a European labourer, whose wife has her own household duties and whose children have to attend school (Carnegie Commission report, cited in Bozzoli, 1983:154).

Firstly, in her discussion, Bozzoli does not take account of the fact that '*Boer*' women were "socially powerful" mainly because of the hierarchical racial structure within apartheid society. Because of the supremacy of their race, racist

government laws enabled their freedom from agricultural labour through access to forced cheap/free African labour.

Secondly, she mentions white women's migration to the urban areas in search of formal employment as another indication of 'Boer' women's strength against patriarchal oppression, which was not the same for African women. However, Bozzoli fails to go into the complexities of the labour markets or formal employment opportunities for African women. In the period in which her study is based, legal restrictions limited the formal employment of African women.<sup>21</sup> Thus the patriarchal oppression of African women was reinforced by the state.

Thirdly, in her discussion of the different power dynamics between 'poor white' and 'native' families, Bozzoli fails to explain the dynamics of race and racial oppression in colonial and apartheid South Africa, and how they impact on the power and control of African men within the family. Within the colonial and apartheid system of racial domination, African men were regarded as inferior, and therefore did not have much control over their own labour, let alone that of their wives or children. Although she acknowledges that "African women are more controlled by the state than do their men," (167) she fails to explore how this 'control' impacts on the patriarchal nature of the African societies under her discussion.

Lastly, while Bozzoli's analysis recognizes that white women are not a homogeneous group, she fails to apply this to African women. Her discussion on white women is confined to the Afrikaner ethnic group, while this is not the case for African women.<sup>22</sup> As with the problem identified above in Campbell's writing, Africans are lumped together into one undifferentiated group. The African society in South Africa has various ethnic groupings with different languages,<sup>23</sup> cultures, histories and belief systems. Therefore, even within the African societies, which she has grouped into one analytic category, the forms of patriarchy would vary. For instance, peasant women and women who went to missionary schools are affected differently by patriarchal domination, and their responses to these forms of oppression would vary based on their different contexts.

Bozzoli's analysis is another instance of biased and improper use of conceptual tools in South African research on African women. Instead of ending up with an understanding of 'many patriarchies' as Bozzoli claims in the

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<sup>21</sup> Bozzoli actually believes that "... the destruction of that peasantry through the legal redefinitions of land tenure relationships seems to have involved an attack by the state on the form of these patriarchal relationships..." (154).

<sup>22</sup> In some instances she makes the distinction between white middle class women and white working class women, while African women are just one urban group (see discussion on '*domestic struggles and class consciousness*,' (Bozzoli, 1983:161).

<sup>23</sup> Under the current government, South Africa has eleven officially recognized languages, of which nine are indigenous.

beginning of her discussion on the '*Patchwork Quilt*' of *patriarchies* (149), the result is a superficial analysis of patriarchal forms in 'African' and 'Boer' societies.

The analyses and conclusions presented above are largely influenced by the colonial and apartheid perception of African women as docile, submissive (see Kuzwayo, 1996) and compliant to the patriarchal ideologies. It is such perceptions that have led South African scholars of women's struggles to characterize these as nothing more than defending the "necessary extension of their roles as mothers" (Posel, 1991:22).

As has already been noted above, the conceptual frameworks followed by most of these academics are limited, as they are premised only on the family or the household as the site of patriarchal domination. Their frameworks fail to go beyond the family to analyse the state and the workplace as other sites of patriarchal domination. By overlooking these two arenas, researchers fail to see women's struggles in areas outside the family as influenced by their gender consciousness and therefore challenging patriarchal domination. By disregarding the critical nature of these struggles and failing to acknowledge women's gender consciousness, these studies fail to analyse how these struggles impact on the gender relations within the family.

## Women and political organisations during the 1980s

After the pass protests in the 1950s, government vigorously suppressed political organisations and arrested or banned most of the leaders involved, including women leaders. For most of the 1960s there was no overt political organisation by African communities. Political organisational renewal at the community level was largely sparked by the workers' organisation in the workplace in 1973 and also students' mobilisation against apartheid education in 1976. With the emergence of community-based organisations, from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, a number of women were drawn into organisational politics (Hassim, 2006; Jaffee, 1987).

Some of the women veterans who were involved in the mobilisation and organisation of women in the 1950s were active in the rebuilding of women's organisations in the early 1980s. The late Dora Tamana, for instance, was the founder of the United Women's Organisation (UWO) in Cape Town. And women like Ntutu Mabhala, Ivy Gcina and Adelaide Mabude played key roles in the organisation and formation of a women's organisation in the Port Elizabeth, Eastern Cape (Cherry, 2007). According to Hassim (2006), in some regions, such as Cape Town, women activists from the trade unions brought in useful organisational skills, which helped establish organisational discipline and

consultative democratic procedures in decision-making processes of women's organisations. She argues further, "the union influence also shaped the emphasis of UWO on the interests of working-class women and on linking women's struggles with broader union campaigns" (Hassim, 2006:65).

Women's organisations were formed regionally and some of the major organisations included the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), UWO in Cape Town and Natal Organisation of Women (NOW). The mobilisation of women at the community level was based on issues that are often described as typically 'women's domain,' like demands for government funded day-care centres and access to housing, and concerns about poor education and health facilities in black communities, high rents and increase in general sales tax that impacted on basic commodities like food and clothing (Cherry, 2007; Jaffee, 1987; Patel, 1988).

Cherry (2007) however indicates that women's issues in the communities also related to issues of safety and security within their neighbourhoods, and challenging the police to prosecute cases of sexual violence. In her discussions with women who were active in the Eastern Cape's PEWO, her informants describe their active involvement in forming "street and area committees" which were established "to maintain law and order, to prevent break-ins, rape. Women would move freely in the townships at night" (cited from Cherry, 2007:306).

Cherry's (2007) informants also described the Port Alfred (in the Eastern Cape) women's protest against poor handling of rape cases by the police. The protest was influenced by various issues about which women were not happy, particularly "how the police looked after certain cases. People would come to us as a women's organisation and say I've been raped and police are just not taking these cases seriously" (cited in Cherry, 2007:298). In one of the cases, the Port Alfred women protested and demanded the arrest of the perpetrator who was well-known in the community. The police claimed to have arrested the man, who was later released back into the community. Women continued their protest, threatened, and demanded that the man leave their community. So, although women did not succeed in ensuring the prosecution of this man, they made it difficult for him to continue living in the same community and thus banished him from the community (Cherry, 2007).

Women's organisations also followed on the traditions of their early predecessors and adopted the broader political agenda of the liberation movement, challenging apartheid policies. In 1983 with the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF), which was aligned to the exiled African National Congress (ANC), most women's organisations formed alliances with the UDF. The association of women's organisations with the broader political framework of the national movements has received widespread criticism from

South African women's studies scholars who questioned the priorities and goals of the women's organisations.

In analysing women's political organisation in the 1980s, scholars (see for instance Hassim, 1991; Horn, 1991; Beall, Hassim and Todes, 1989) questioned women's commitment in taking up 'women's issues' within the male dominated structures of the liberation movement. Hassim (1991:69), for instance, argues that, black women who have been politically active have tended to get involved in broader campaigns against apartheid or in the trade unions, rather than take up women's issues per se. A similar assessment of women's organisation in South Africa has also been made by Charman, de Swardt and Simons (1991:59), who regard the family as a "key site" in struggles for equality between women and men in society. Charman, de Swardt and Simons (1991:45) argue that the participation of women in political organisations is not instrumental to the development of gender conscious struggles that tackle power relations "specifically between husbands and wife." They point out that:

On the contrary, women's organisations are important institutions in the conservation of women's subordination. They police the boundaries of the gender division of labour, reproduce the cultural separateness of women from men and produce 'devout domesticity' (Charman, de Swardt and Simons, 1991:59).

The analyses of women's participation in political organisations during the 1980s was conducted within the narrow western feminism framework that failed to conceptualise women's struggles under repressive government regimes like the apartheid or working class women's struggles in the workplace. According to Fester (1997:46), who was an activist in the United Women's Organisation (UWO) in Cape Town, the "western inspired" definitions of women's issues excluded critical components of women's everyday experiences and reality.

In her recent research on *women's organisation and democracy in South Africa* Hassim (2006) acknowledges that narrow definitions of feminism that do not conceptualise the specific historical and cultural contexts in which women's actions take place, are not useful in explaining forms of gender consciousness that emerged within the anti-apartheid movements. She points out that, "national liberation facilitated and legitimated women's politicisation, albeit for reasons of mass mobilisation rather than concerns for gender equality per se and provided a context in and against which to elaborate these formulations" (Hassim, 2006:36). Nevertheless, Hassim (2006) explains that the negative attitudes towards feminism by women activists in national liberation movements were fuelled by misunderstanding or poor comprehension of feminism or the ideals promoted by the feminist project. Firstly, she identifies the articulation of sexual and

reproductive rights as a demand for the right to freedom of sexual choice as the source of tensions between women activists in liberation movements (2006:39). Secondly, she argues that feminism was viewed as divisive because of its demands and emphasis on questioning power relations between women and men, and the dominance of men in leadership structures of the liberation movements (2006:29).

I argue that on the contrary, these tensions mainly resulted from the inadequacy of feminist conceptualisations of 'women's issues' and the inability to expand its definition so as to capture women's experiences in different spheres. For instance, women in the trade unions made demands for maternity leave and the right to have families during the 1980s, which is indeed a demand about controlling their bodies and the right to make reproductive choices, without being forced to make a choice between motherhood and paid fulltime employment. As it will be shown in the thesis, women trade union activists like Thembi Nabe and Lydia Kompe in the early 1980s raised issues of sexual relations between women and men within the household. Lastly, women in the trade unions challenged male domination of the labour movement, and these struggles could be observed even before the launch of COSATU in 1985. Women activists within the trade unions may not have framed their issues within the feminist framework, but they did indeed challenge patriarchal relations of male domination.

Hassim's study on women's organisations and democracy in South Africa provides useful insights into women's political organisation during the 1980s and the transition period in South Africa. She focuses on the interactive relationship between women's political organisations and the broader liberation movement. She further examines the extent to which both women's organisations and the liberation movement influenced and shaped each other's goals and articulations on rights for equality, both during the apartheid period and the transition phase that culminated in the democratisation of South Africa in 1994.

My research takes a different approach from that of Hassim in that I focus on women within COSATU as a labour organisation. The emphasis is placed on individual women and the experiences they bring to the different union organisations in which they are active. This research highlights individuals' specific experiences in different arenas and how these inform their articulations on gender inequality, and activism against these inequities. The examination of gender consciousness and articulations of feminist demands within trade unions is conducted within specific contexts that women activists identify as sites of gender oppression in their individual and collective lives. The concepts of gender consciousness, women's issues, and struggles for gender equity are therefore

discussed within the framework provided by the individual women activists interviewed in this research.

## Analysis of the transition period and the role of COSATU women in this process

The literature on transition regards this process as an elite event that involves the political leadership.<sup>24</sup> According to Przeworski (1991), the political leadership participates in negotiations that exclude the involvement of grass-root individuals or organisations. In these negotiations, women are also left out, since they do not constitute the elite political leadership. Adler and Webster (1995) have already challenged the transition theory by highlighting the influential role played by the South African labour movement during the transition phase.

Similarly, women's studies have also criticized transition theory for the continued treatment of politics as a male domain, excluding women in its analyses (Waylen, 2007a and 2007b; Hassim, 2006; Cock, 1997). Waylen (2007a:15) observes that feminist scholars' criticism has not made any major impact in how mainstream democratisation literature analyses transitions, and the extent to which they include women as subjects of analyses. The gendered nature of this process is still not given any significant value in the literature. Referring to the analyses in South Africa, Hassim (2006:132) notes that, "the view of politics as the business of elites – primarily male – has been common in South Africa." The tendency to prioritise male dominated politics diminishes women as political actors, and undermines the political spheres in which their political activities take place (Hassim, 2006:132).

The South African transition process offers an illustration of the gendered nature of transitions and democratisation processes. The achievement by South African women "to participate in the negotiations that established a new political system as part of a transition to democracy" is exceptional (Waylen, 2007b:522). Hassim (2006) indicates that during 1991 and 1994 women fought vociferously against marginalisation and exclusion from the constitutional process. "Women's participation in the constitutional negotiations tempered, if not undermined the power of conservative forces..." (Hassim, 2006:138).

Women's demands for inclusion were not only limited to representation or participation, but they also questioned the extent to which the mere declaration of democracy and equal citizenship rights will guarantee access to institutions of power (Hassim, 2006:139). Their demand for inclusion sought the deconstruction

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<sup>24</sup> For instance see Przeworski (1991) *Democracy and the Market: Political and Economic Reforms in Eastern Europe and Latin America*. United States: Cambridge University Press. Bond, P. (2000) *Elite Transition: From Apartheid to Neo-Liberalism in South Africa*. London: Pluto Press.

of the male political language and the reformulation of political concepts so that they make specific references to women.

The strategy for inclusion was designed to create the political space in which women could articulate a broader notion of citizenship and define citizenship in ways that recognized the plurality of interests in society. The strategy of inclusion was meant to broaden the substantive content of citizenship beyond the class and race interests initially represented at the multi-party negotiations (Hassim, 2006:139).

In explaining the success of South African women during the transition process, scholars have analysed the mobilisation and organisation of women into the Women's National Coalition (WNC). The WNC was formed in 1992 on the initiative of women from the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) (Hassim, 2006; Waylen, 2007a, 2007b; Cock, 1997). Since the negotiations for the democratisation of South Africa were at the multi-party level, women from the ANCWL sought to gain the support of women from other political parties (Hassim, 2006). This was a strategy to broaden support for "a progressive women's agenda" (Hassim, 2006:135). As motivation for the unity of women, Frene Ginwala from the ANCWL argued that:

If we are going to push for a real challenge to gender oppression and the real emancipation of women, what we need is a strong women's organisation, organized around the issues of concern to women. Therefore while the League has a particular role to play, we still need a national women's organisation. We need an organisation to which we will bring all women, and women's organisations, which do not necessarily subscribe to particular ANC position ... It will allow us to force decisions in our favour when it comes to an either or situation, in a budget debate or anything else... I mean politics is about power and women's liberation is about power (cited in Hassim, 2006:134).

According to Seidman (1999), the success of South African women in influencing the transition process also has to be explained by looking at the opportunity structure in the form of discourses that emerged in the early 1990s. She points out that during the 1980s most anti-apartheid activists "remained publicly silent" on issues of gender equality and how these issues should be addressed in a post apartheid period (1999:291). The intervention of feminist intellectuals in the early 1990s, increased public debates that raised issues of gender equality and transformation of political institutions to account for women's rights (Seidman, 1999:292).

Waylen (2007b:524) highlights the strategic "triple alliance" of women academics, politicians and activists in facilitating the inclusion of gender issues

on the “policy agenda of the transition.” She further argues that although the number of key actors involved was small, the WNC was the vehicle that facilitated a triple alliance of key women activists, academics and politicians of all races, many of them elite members who were well connected in the ANC, to engage with the transition process and achieve what none could have done on their own (Waylen, 2007b:531).

Although the feminist scholarship on the transition process makes reference to women’s grass-root organisations (including COSATU women) and South Africa’s long tradition of women’s organisation, their analyses of this process draw mainly on the experiences of ‘elite’ women members (see Waylen, 2007a and 2007b; Hassim, 2006; Seidman, 1999 and 1993; Cock, 1997). Much emphasis in this literature has been on the role of the African National Congress Women’s League (ANCWL) and the intellectual activists in driving the process of transition. This literature has not done an in-depth analysis of women’s activism and struggles within the labour movement to assess their influence on gender politics in South Africa, and more specifically the transition process.

This research argues that our analysis of the transition process and the WNC needs to include the contribution to, and role played by working class women in shaping the gendered outcomes of the democratisation process. I argue that the transition process was not only an ‘elite affair’ which relied on key political figures with ‘political connections’ and academics with technical skills and knowledge of the legal and political processes. The analysis of the transition process should also include the participation and involvement of working class women. COSATU women activists participated in the WNC as experienced gender activists who publicly challenged gender inequities and male domination within their unions, the workplace and other sectors of society. Their experience of gender activism within the male dominated labour movement was central in their participation in the transition process and influencing demands on gender equity. COSATU women activists relied on their organisational links with COSATU as an influential labour movement federation that had links to the dominant African National Congress (ANC). The organisational strength of COSATU and the ability to mobilise grass-root members to support their demands was the key for COSATU gender activists.

## Outline of the thesis

Chapter two presents a theoretical discussion of social movement theory. It argues that social movements’ processes are largely gendered. The participation of women and men in social movements is often influenced by their different

gender identities and this has an impact on social movement processes. The chapter also discusses the research process in gathering data for this study.

Chapter three provides background on the emergence of African trade unions in South Africa in the early 1970s. I argue that the emergence of trade unions during this period was influenced firstly by the economic crisis, and secondly the political conditions, both of which had detrimental effects on the African working class. The 1970s and early 1980s were largely characterized by workplace strikes and struggles against employers, with workers demanding trade union rights, improved working conditions, and wages. In analysing workers' struggles during this period, analysts have ignored the gender aspect of these struggles. I argue that women participated in these workplace struggles and highlighted gender discrimination in the working conditions and wages.

Chapter four focuses on the social background of women activists to gain knowledge of their different experiences of racism and sexism. In this chapter, I demonstrate that these women's experiences in different spheres of their lives are central in their agitation and mobilisation into trade union activities. The workplace and the emergence of trade unions offer these women unionists the opportunity to take action against what they have always perceived as injustices.

Chapter five discusses the actual mobilisation of women and struggles for trade union organisation in the workplace. It underscores the proactive role of women in organizing and mobilising fellow workers into trade unions. Like their male counterparts, these women activists joined trade unions to challenge unfair working conditions and wages. Equally important though, their motivations for trade union action are also driven by their experiences of racism and sexism.

Chapter six analyses the impact of women's activism on their lives in the family. It examines women's relationships in their private lives and in the family, and how their trade union activities influence the power relations within these relationships. The chapter demonstrates that, in most cases, women are often in a subordinate position within relationships. Nevertheless, women activists interviewed in this research do challenge the unequal power relations in their private lives, and do insist on pursuing their trade union activities.

Chapter seven discusses women's struggles for gender equality within the labour movement. It addresses women's gender consciousness resulting from their experiences within the labour movement, and women's attempts to build solidarity with each other in order to challenge their assigned secondary status. The chapter demonstrates women's strategies and struggles for accessing public spaces and inserting gender debates within the labour movement discourses.

Chapter eight focuses on the participation of COSATU women in the transition and democratisation process in South Africa in the early 1990s. The

chapter argues that COSATU women's earlier struggles within the labour movement largely informed their participation in the WNC.

Chapter nine is the conclusion of the thesis. This chapter summarizes the major arguments in the thesis.

## Gender, Identity and Social Movements

### Introduction

Social movement organisations like the labour movement in South Africa emerge within contexts shaped and influenced by the dominant social constructions in society. The interactions and the participation of different individuals within social movements are defined therefore by the beliefs and social values within their contexts. This means that social movements are likely to be characterized by the same gender relations and gender hierarchies dominant within the society in which they operate. Power is a critical construct that is easily associated with masculinity and therefore excludes women from having major influence in key decision-making structures. Therefore, the participation of women in male dominated social movements such as the labour movement is characterized by struggles over the definition and articulation of interests that are representative of both gender groups.

As already explained, this thesis explores the mobilisation of women into South African trade unions and their struggles for gender equality. The study employs social movement theory to highlight the processes involved in their mobilisation. In this chapter I argue that social movement processes are gendered, and that the participation and interests of women and men are often influenced by their gender identities. Social movement participation, as a gendered political process, is fraught with power struggles. The chapter will conclude by describing and explaining the research process and methods followed in collecting data for this study.

## Defining Social movement

Social movement is perceived as a process whereby a group of individuals develop solidarity on the basis of shared beliefs, and join forces in opposition to a particular issue or to demand changes in society (Diani, 1992). Diani and della Porta (2006) further maintain that “social movements are a distinct social process, consisting of the mechanisms through which actors engaged in collective action are involved in conflictual relations with clearly identified opponents; are linked by dense informal networks and share a distinct collective identity” (della Porta and Diani: 2006:20).<sup>25</sup> It follows, therefore, that, as an integrated network of different individuals or groups, social movements from time to time will coordinate to use collective action either in the form of public protests or other forms of protests to make their demands.

Sustained collective action is a distinct feature of social movements (Tarrow, 1994). Della Porta and Diani (2006:23) argue further that “we have a social movement dynamic going on when single episodes of collective action are perceived as components of a longer lasting action, rather than discrete events, and when those who are engaged in them feel linked by ties of solidarity and of ideal communions with protagonists of other analogous mobilisations.”

Typical of mainstream social science theories is that they traditionally neglected incorporating a gender analysis of social movements and social protests (Taylor, 1999). Gender in social movement theory, as an analytical category, is a recent phenomenon influenced by feminist scholars studying the impact of gender on social movements and protests (Einwohner, Hollander and Olson, 2000; Taylor, 1999). These studies show the centrality of incorporating gender analysis in social movements and social protests research. They highlight the fact that gender hierarchies within social movements, or gender differences between social movement participants influence the social processes of social movements (Taylor, 1999). Einwohner, Hollander and Olson (2000) explain the influence of gender on social movements as follows:

When we say that a movement is gendered, we mean that some aspect of the movement constructs differences between women and men and/or elicits a certain set of social meanings because of its associations, actual or assumed, with femininities or masculinities (2000:682).

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<sup>25</sup> Scholars of social movements (for example, Tilly 2004; Tarrow 1998 and others) have offered several definitions of the concept. Common to most of the definitions offered is that there is claim being made by the aggrieved, and there is a source for the tension experienced by the aggrieved. Thus they mount a collective action targeted at the source of their frustration. This chapter follows this definition since it can be identified closely with the phenomenon studied in this research.

Gender is a significant element of social relationships (Scott, 1986:1067) that is persistent within social movement organisations. Furthermore, gender is a primary field within which, or by means of which, power is articulated (Scott, 1986:1069). This means that if social movements are gendered, relations within social movements are structured along the axis of power and domination. Men in social movements are often regarded as the powerful and dominant ones as opposed to women.

An analysis of gender relations within social movements, and in particular this research, enables us to show that relations within the South African labour movement are characterized by gender politics or struggles. The gender content of definitions or meanings and goals of social movements are often contested, and are characterized by these gender politics. This means, therefore, that a full account of social movement processes and their outcomes needs to reflect the influence of gender relations on these processes.

#### *Defining women's movement*

Research on comparative women's movement studies has been confronted largely with a "major conceptual problem" in terms of applying the concept of women's movement across different contexts (Beckwith, 2000:434). The challenges in defining women's movements cross-nationally, originate mainly from the differences in the contexts within which women's movements mobilise (see Beckwith, 2000; Ferree, 2006 and McBride and Mazur, forthcoming). Within these different contexts, women's organisation and mobilisation has been influenced by a multiplicity of factors (Ferree, 2006; McBride and Mazur, forthcoming).

In her edited book, *The Challenges of Local Feminisms*, Basu (1991) offers a critique of early comparative women's movements studies. Basu (1991) underscores women's movement scholars' failure to include women's movements in the postcolonial world in their conceptualisations and analyses. She argues that women's movements definitions are often derived from Western contexts, and do not take into account the diversity and variations in "the forms of women's oppression and women's movements" (Basu, 1991:1). Such conceptualisations have often prescribed women's issues and women's struggles, and the prioritisation of these issues, without reflecting on the dynamics of women's oppressions in different contexts.

Mohanty (1991) is among feminist scholars of colour who have criticized the conceptualisation of gender and power relations that suggests that it is a unitary concept that has the same meanings in different social locations and contexts. The "singular focus on gender as a basis for equal rights," has largely resulted in the prescription of women's oppressions as primarily based on gender relations

between women and men, to the exclusion of race, class and colonial domination (Mohanty, 1991:3).

Recently, scholars like Beckwith (2000), Ferree (2006) and McBride and Mazur (forthcoming) have taken account of this short-sightedness and have expanded the definitions in this field. In defining the women's movement, importance is given to women's organisation on the basis of their collective gender identity, and taking leadership and decision-making in articulating a discourse that focuses on the gendered identity of women (McBride and Mazur, forthcoming). The definitions of the women's movement and feminist women's movement draw distinctions between gender consciousness and feminist consciousness (McBride and Mazur, forthcoming). Rinehart (1992:32) defines gender consciousness as:

The recognition that one's relation to the political world is at least partly shaped by being female or male. This recognition is followed by identification with others in the 'group' of one's sex, positive affect toward the group and a feeling of interdependence with the group's fortunes.

According to Gan-Ling Chow (1996), gender consciousness is useful in helping women understand the gender power relations in society, and how these are created and maintained through socialization processes and certain institutions in society. In their definition of the women's movement, McBride and Mazur (forthcoming) place emphasis on the gender discourse within the movement, and argue that the content of this discourse will be determined by the context in which women organise, their different identities and experiences. Similarly, Beckwith (2000) who identifies the "primacy of women's gender experiences and women's issues" in her definition of the women's movement, points out that "the specific content of women's issues and women's gendered experiences, of course, will vary across national and state structures, cultural contexts and women's intersecting classed, racialised and other experiences and identities" (437).

Feminist women's movements are defined by features of the women's movement and a feminist consciousness. Feminist consciousness is characterised by deliberate attempts (through activism, for instance) to challenge the patriarchal relations of power and domination of women by men in all sectors and institutions of society (Ferree, 2006:6). Collins (1990), Mohanty (1991) and hooks (1984) were among the early feminist writers to highlight the intersectionality of women's oppression on the basis of race and class, and the need to include such struggles in the definition of feminism. For instance, race, class, colonial, and apartheid oppression have been central in South Africa's women's movement and in most women's movements in postcolonial societies.

In the South African context (similar to Latin America or Eastern Europe) the women's movement initially denounced associations with feminism.<sup>26</sup>

Feminist movements according to Beckwith (2000:437) are distinguished by their challenge of patriarchy. Feminist movements share a gendered power analysis of women's subordination, and contest political, social and other power arrangements of domination and subordination on the basis of gender. Beckwith's definition suggests that feminist struggles are not only focused on gender relations between women and men, but can be also at the political level where, for instance, women raise gender oppressions resulting from race and class positions. In agreement with Beckwith's definition, Ferree and Mueller (2004) argue that the intersectionality of women's oppressions and struggles means that, depending on the nature of oppressions experienced in particular contexts; feminism may not necessarily be the exclusive or primary goal of the women's movement (Ferree and Mueller, 2004:578).

Beckwith (2000) notes that the distinctions between women's movements and feminist movements can be made at the conceptual level, but empirically these movements' characteristics often interrelate and overlap. Ferree (2006) has also made a similar observation in arguing that within feminist movements and women's movements there is a dynamic interaction in terms of the issues that members or the organisation may concern itself with at particular periods. The mobilisation of women's movements often raises their members' gender consciousness and advocacy for strategies to challenge gender inequities within their social locations. Similarly, feminist mobilisations are also likely to inspire members to engage in transformative struggles that do not necessarily concern gender equality (Ferree, 2006). It is on the basis of this observation of the dynamic interaction between women's movement and feminist movements that Ferree (2006:8) concludes that:

In this set of changing relations, to restrict analysis to only those temporary phases in which women's movements have chosen to focus exclusively on challenging gender subordination or seeking equality with men of their own group marginalizes the ongoing intersectional elements of both.

These new definitions by women's movement scholars therefore challenge the previous analyses of women's movements that often suggested that all women's movements' primary goals are feminism (Ferree and Mueller, 2004). Ferree (2006:7) argues that how the movement prioritises its goals – “where feminism

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<sup>26</sup> Feminism as it was defined in the 1970s and early 1980s failed to include the politics of race and class domination, and how these kinds of oppressions affected women differently. It was on this basis that many women failed to see the relevance of feminism to their struggles as black women in South Africa.

stands on the list of priorities...” – is not necessarily a key-defining feature of the women’s movement.

Nor is it true by definition that a person or group that does not call itself feminist does not have feminist goals, since the identity can carry other connotations in a local setting (whether of radicalism or exclusivity or cultural difference) that an activist may seek to avoid by choosing another label (Ferree, 2006:7).

Drawing from their Research Network on Gender Politics and the State (RNGS) longitudinal comparative research, McBride and Mazur, (forthcoming:28) warn scholars that instead of prescribing a specific set of women’s interests or policy goals, scholars need to allow for the women in the movements themselves to define the specific ideas, aspirations, and goals from their own experiences. Therefore, in following the definitions provided, researchers need to use these as indicators and be flexible in applying them to different contexts.

These definitions are relevant within the South African context, as the history of women’s movement and mobilisation shows that women at different periods of colonial and apartheid oppression have prioritised various sets of issues. Women’s organisation in South Africa shows that specific gender discriminatory laws that affected them as a racial gender group have often precipitated the collective mobilisation of women under colonial and apartheid oppression (for instance the struggles against pass laws in 1913 under colonial rule and later in 1956 under apartheid government).

This research argues that COSATU women’s structures indicate features of feminism and feminist struggles based on their conscious activism against gender oppression within their various social settings. Women’s struggles in the workplace and trade unions show that their different identities and social locations within apartheid society are significant in defining their experiences and struggles against gender oppression. For instance, women activists in this research have engaged in workplace and trade union struggles as members of the working class collective; they have also mobilised on the basis of their gendered identity as African women to challenge gender oppression in the workplace, trade unions and society. These intersections are significant in shaping trade union women’s feminism and feminist struggles.

## The political opportunity structure

As indicated earlier, social movement emergence is a process with a certain related set of events (Tarrow, 1994). This means that a set of events or occurrences will take place, culminating in social movement emergence. The

emergence of social movements often results from perceived divisions in society between those in authority or power and those outside it (Tarrow, 1994; McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly, 2001). Social movements emerge as an attempt through collective action to challenge a particular status quo causing discontent. Social movements will act to identify the problem and the cause of the grievance, and thus suggest collective action to change the situation (Tarrow, 1994; della Porta and Diani, 2006).

In this process, framing or interpretation of the problem (which will be discussed later in the chapter) that is being challenged and the proposed solution, are crucial to movement emergence. Framing and interpretation are a social process for articulating a variety of private beliefs and preferences into shared meanings and values for joint action (Oberschall, 1996:97). Social movement emergence gives new meaning to a set of issues or conflict that has always existed, by providing a collective force, thus assuring individuals of a shared sense of feeling (della Porta and Diani, 1999:17). The strength of social movements lies in their ability to develop a common purpose, collective identity and solidarity, and commitment to collective action.

Because of their limited power or resources to fight directly against their antagonists, social movements often take advantage of the political opportunities presented by the political contexts (Tarrow, 1994). The political opportunity structure is central to the emergence of social movements. Tarrow (1994:18) defines political opportunity structure as consistent dimensions of the political environment that either encourage or discourage people from using collective action. The elements of the political opportunity structure identified by Tarrow in the emergence of social movements include the opening up of access to power, unstable alignments, influential allies and division within or amongst the ruling elite. According to Tarrow (1994), the existence of these elements in a political system incites challengers of the state to mobilise support for protest against the state. Movement formation is the product of people seizing and making opportunities (Tarrow, 1994:81).

The application of the concept of political opportunity structure in cross-national comparative studies on social movements, however, has been criticized by some scholars (Gamson and Meyer, 1996; Meyer, 2004). In using the concept, scholars have added new variables, which are often determined by the nature and concerns of their research that has “expanded the explanatory power of the concept but reduced its specificity” (della Porta and Diani, 2006:17).

The second criticism that the concept has received relates to limited analyses or explanation of the associations between the context and action. Meyer and Minkoff (2004:1463) argue that understanding the relationship between context and action is critical to tackling the larger theoretical question of the relationship

between structure and agency. Opportunities in the structure need to be perceived as important opportunities by the movement actors for collective action to take place. Structural availability must be filtered through a process of “cognitive liberation” in order to unleash turmoil (della Porta and Diani, 2006:17-18).

Della Porta and Diani (2006) argue that for protest to take place, activists need to identify the system as the target for their problems and be convinced that they have the power to effect changes through protests. In this way, opportunity structure is a subjective category that is dependent on social movement actors’ interpretations and the association they draw between that particular opportunity and the goals of the movement (della Porta and Diani, 2006). It is therefore critical for researchers to understand and explain the “cognitive processes” involved between the actors’ interpretation of the opportunity structure and the decision to take action at a specific period (della Porta and Diani, 2006:18).

Kriesi (2004) points out that the strategic choices and decisions that movement actors adopt concerning the specific time to act and the specific strategy largely depend on members’ subjective perceptions of specific opportunities. Identifying opportunities and acting on these opportunities is a process in which members engage in debates with conflicting views. “...the definition of opportunity, that is, the appreciation of the concrete situation, is typically highly contentious within a social movement... (Kriesi, 2004:78). An instance of this process will be shown in chapter seven. When COSATU women activists debated the need to form women’s structures within the labour movement to directly challenge gender inequalities, they were divided on this, with some questioning the timing of such a decision.

The political opportunity structure has received much attention in social movement literature, and particularly in highlighting its efficacy in framing processes of social movements. However, Gamson (2004:249) argues that framing processes take place within the discursive “playing field.” Della Porta and Diani (2006:219) indicate that the emphasis on the political opportunity structure, in particular, has obscured the role of discursive opportunities, such as the capacity of movements’ themes to resonate with cultural values. Social movement actors draw on the dominant discourses, the language and concepts used within this context, to suit their messages and in the process influence the public’s perceptions. Cultural environments define the resonance of movements’ demands with changes possible only in the transitional times (della Porta and Diani, 2006:219).

Taking account of the limitations that have been highlighted concerning the concept of political opportunity structure, this research shows the continued usefulness of the concept in explaining the emergence of black trade unions in the early 1970s and women’s mobilisation into unions. This is done through

specifying the critical variables in both processes. The research also takes into account the significance of the cultural context and discourse analysis in the framing of women's demands, particularly during the transition period.

This research spans a period from 1973 to 2003 in which the socio-political and economic context changed dramatically in each phase. The differences in each phase are indicative of the variations in opportunities for women's mobilisation and their strategies for gender mobilisation within the labour movement. For instance, in this thesis I will show that South African women have a long history of political mobilisation and participation in protests. I argue that women's mobilisation and protests within the different periods was influenced by different political opportunity structures. For instance, women's mobilisation in the period before the 1970s largely focused on opposing the pass laws and the attempts by the state to control and subordinate the economic activities of African women (see Walker, 1991; Wells, 1986). The mobilisation of women from the early 1970s onwards however, was influenced by the reforms and concessions made by the apartheid state as it was responding to different challenges within the economic and political context.

Firstly, the growth of the economy in the 1960s resulted in an increasing number of African women gaining employment opportunities (Terreblanche, 2002). The government thus relaxed the restrictions it placed on the employment of women in the formal sector. The number of women in formal employment sector therefore increased during the 1970s and 1980s. Secondly, the economic crisis in the early 1970s and the workers strikes that led to the legalization of African trade union organisation in the workplace are significant for the mobilisation of women into trade union organisations. The strikes and the demands made resonated with most women workers, who were the lowest paid and most likely to have poor working conditions. Thirdly, African trade union organisation in an apartheid context, wherein mobilisation was based on race, politicised many women, giving them opportunities to participate in mainstream politics. Fourthly, the growth and militancy of the trade union movement in South Africa from the late 1970s to the 1980s is an important opportunity structure in analysing women's demands for gender equality in labour laws and the broader public laws. Meyer (2002:13) argues that, "claims are defined not only by what activists want, but also what they think is possible. The nature of the state and the content of public policy define both urgency and possibility." I argue that women's demands for gender equality in the workplace were based on their awareness of the newly gained strength of the labour movement, and the extent to which their demands could be achieved through the labour movement.

Lastly, the transition process in the early 1990s, and the changes observed within the political context from this period onwards, also constitutes an

important political opportunity structure for women's mobilisation. The political language and discourse of democracy, justice, and equal rights are significant in influencing women's demands for the inclusion of women workers' rights in the labour movement's national demands for a democratic constitution, as well as in their participation within the Women's National Coalition.

## Frame alignment in social movement theory

Political opportunities and the mobilising structures are central for social movement emergence. However, McAdam, McCarthy and Zald (1996) note that these alone are not sufficient to explain individuals' motivations for participation in collective action. They argue that mediating between opportunity, organisation and action are the shared meanings and definitions that people bring to their situation (1996:5). The framing process is an important component in social movement action; it is interdependent and interactive with the political opportunity and mobilising structures.

Social movements use frame alignment to draw a link between individuals' experiences of the social environment and the nature of the causes of their social discontent (Snow, Rochford, Worden and Benford, 1986). Social movements are constantly engaged in the act of providing meaning, and interpreting events and conditions in a manner that would encourage supporters to take action to change the situation. Thus social movements use frames to give new meaning to situations or factors that have existed, but have not been effectively challenged. By identifying the problem in society, social movements provide an explanation for the causes, and propose collective action as a solution in addressing the discontent experienced (Tarrow, 1994; della Porta and Diani, 1999; 2006).

In the process of providing meaning and interpreting events and conditions, social movements also aim at ensuring that individuals identify with the activities, goals and ideology of the movement (McAdam, 1996:339). Frame alignment is therefore defined as referring to the linkage of individual and SMO [Social Movement Organisation] interpretive orientations, such that some set of individual interests, values and beliefs and SMO activities, goals and ideology are congruent and complementary. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective (Snow et al, 1986: 464).

Snow (2004) points out that collective action frames not only perform an interpretive function in the sense of providing answers to the question "what is going on here?", but they also are decidedly more agentic and contentious in the sense of calling for action that problematises and challenges existing authoritative views and framings of reality (385). Thus framing for social

movements is a conscious and strategic attempt by social movements to interpret accounts of events in a manner that would de-legitimise the status quo, and motivate supporters to take action to challenge the situation (Benford and Snow, 2000; McAdam, 1996).

The process of framing also involves exploration of solutions to address the specific grievances identified by the social movement. It also involves idealization about transforming social relations and the power relations between different social groupings in society (della Porta and Diani, 2006).

The symbolic elaboration of a movement ... opens new spaces and new prospects for action, making it possible to think of aims and objectives, which the dominant culture tends instead to exclude from the outset. In this sense it is possible to conceive of movements as media through which concepts and perspectives, which might otherwise have remained marginal, are disseminated in society (della Porta and Diani, 2006:77).

The participation of women in the South African labour movement provides a significant example of this process. The mobilisation into these organisations allowed women activists public spaces to challenge dominant conceptions on gender relations in the workplace and society and to influence demands for transformation.

The important aspect to note about social movements and the framing process is that not all events or experiences are incorporated into the mobilisation frame. The mobilisation frame is selected on the basis of the dominant culture and the political context. This means ...“some events, issues, and beliefs or ideas are accented and highlighted in contrast to others, with the result that they become more salient in an array or hierarchy of group relevant issues...” (Snow, 2004:400). This process of frame mobilisation is characterized by debates or contests over meaning or definitions, and prioritisation of issues, events and experiences, which Snow (2004:204) refers to as “discursive fields or terrains.”

The beliefs and interests of those in leadership of the social movement are essential since they are in a position to influence the mobilisation process according to what they perceive to be critical issues for mobilisation and collective action. The dominance of one particular group in social movement leadership often influences the grievances that are prioritised and portrayed by the social movement. For instance, with the dominance of men in the leadership structures of the South African labour movement, traditional working class issues (such as wages and working conditions, and excluding gender specific discrimination) and the national liberation struggle were central in the framing and mobilisation process. In the context of apartheid South Africa, whereby racism was institutionalised, race became a central mobilising frame during the

early 1970s. Race became a dominant discourse used by both the opponents of apartheid and the apartheid regime itself. As a result, gender discrimination as an issue for frame mobilisation and collective action was given less significance.

The invisibility of women in social movements like the labour movement in South Africa highlights the issue of gender hierarchy and representation of gender issues in organisations (see Acker, 1990). It also underscores the undermining of the interests of the less dominant groups within the public discourses dominated by masculine ideologies.

Brush (1999:133) asserts that social movement discourse enables people to frame daily experiences to understand and organize life events. However, the life experiences of African women and oppressions within their context vary from their male counterparts and the majority of the social movement leadership. Referring to the experiences of African American women, Brush points out that the “structural dimensions of oppression are multiple and interlocking; race and gender inequalities intersect in daily experiences” (1999:132). A discourse that focuses on a single aspect of oppression therefore fails to address the multiple life experiences and sources of oppression for many African women.

One of the aims of this research is to explain how women created the space to articulate their own particular interests as a gender group within a context dominated by race and class struggle discourses. Firstly, I argue that the mobilisation of trade unions in the early 1970s and their subsequent legalization in 1979 by the Wiehahn Commission is critical in explaining the increasing influence of women within the labour movement’s framing mobilisation processes. The growth of women in the labour movement (as well as female dominated and led unions like CCAWUSA) and in leadership positions explains the expansion of the mobilisation framework of the labour movement, which addressed the structural inequalities between women and men.

Secondly, this research argues that the use of separate spaces (such as the women’s forums) whereby women held meetings as a collective group, is important in the mobilisation and framing of women’s issues within the labour movement (Fonow, 2003; Katzenstein, 1998; Briskin, 1993). Katzenstein (1998:33) asserts that, “for protests to occur within institutions there must be protected spaces or habitats where activists can meet, share experiences, receive affirmation and strategize for change.” Fantasia and Hirsch (1995:145) refer to such spaces as “havens” or “free social spaces.” They argue that it is in such spaces that the subordinate groups have the liberty to criticize the dominant ideologies, traditions and culture and make attempts for reform (Fantasia and Hirsch, 1995).

In this thesis I suggest that an analysis of women’s structures is critical in understanding the emergence of the gender mobilisation framework within the

labour movement during the early 1980s through to the period of the transition process in the early 1990s. This analysis shows how women presented their issues strategically within a context dominated by race and class struggle discourses, and therefore getting the labour movement to acknowledge the unique experiences of women under apartheid oppression. The gender campaigns by women in the labour movement were critical in introducing a gender element into the national discourses of the labour movement in the late 1980s and especially in the 1990s during the transition period.

## Collective identity in social movement theory

Collective identity is a common feeling, a 'we' feeling or bond shared by members of a particular group; it can also be defined as an experienced sense of belonging to a group. Collective identity develops through a conscious effort to construct a common feeling and shared interests amongst members of a group. It brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause that enables individual activists and / or organisations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but surely compatible, in a broader collective mobilisation (della Porta and Diani, 2006:21).

Melucci (1996:44) regards collective identity as an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level), and concerned with the orientation of action and field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place. Collective identity formation within social movements is a process in which agents are constantly engaged in its construction and reconstruction (Melucci, 1996; Gamson, 1996; Taylor and Whittier, 1995). "... As a cultural mechanism of collective action, collective identity is an emergent socially constructed property that cannot be reduced simply to subjective individual attitudes (Taylor and Whittier, 1995: 172).

Collective identity in social movements is crucial as it bonds the participants and draws the boundaries between social movement participants and their opponents. The sense of belonging is confined to only those who share in the same ideals and beliefs of the social movement (Diani, 1992). By delineating boundaries, collective identity in social movement formation "implies direct opposition to the dominant order" (Taylor and Whittier, 1992:110). Taylor and Whittier (1992) emphasize that in social movement activity, collective identity is politicised, as it is a process that emerges out of social and political struggles. Klandermans and de Weerd (2000) support this argument by further asserting that:

Causal attributions disseminated by social and political actors give circumstances and social categories their political meaning, which is further confirmed by interactions with authorities. It is this reciprocity of causal attributions and encounters with opponents that produce the potentially explosive mix of shared moral indignation and oppositional consciousness that makes collective identity politically significant (70-71).

Within the racist context of apartheid, racial identity became a common source of unity for the oppressed groups. The oppression and exclusion of racial groups from the social, economic, and political system of the country offered meaning and a common identity to those struggling for the liberation of all black people (Tshoaedi and Hlela, 2006). For the oppressed groups (both women and men), white management and the state were perceived as targets for resistance. In this case, identity formation and solidarity has largely been influenced by the frame alignment of race that sought to create distinct boundaries between ‘us’ and ‘them’ (Taylor and Whittier, 1992). Taylor and Whittier (1992) further argue that boundaries are “central to the formation of collective identity because they promote a heightened awareness of a group’s commonalities and frame interaction between members of the in-group and the out-group” (111). Taylor (1999:25) points out that people do not bring ready-made identities (e.g. gendered, racial, sexual or national) to collective action. However, collective identities displayed by social movement actors often emerge out of shared interests, experiences and solidarity.

Although collective identity is about shared ideals and beliefs, Diani (1992) cautions us against assumptions of homogeneity within social movements. He argues that although members within a collective group share a similar identity, they may have variations in conceptualising the ideas and goals of the movement. When individuals participate in social movements they are often motivated by diverse experiences or observations, and thus their expectations from their movement participation will also vary, creating tensions within the social movement (della Porta and Diani, 2006). By taking part in the life of a movement, people often seek answers to their own specific aspirations and concerns (della Porta and Diani, 2006: 96).

Movement participants may have shared interests and experiences in terms of their race; however, gender differences can be a mediating factor in their experiences of racial oppression (Diani, 1992), and therefore their ideas and expectations of their movement participation may vary. McAdam (1992) underscores the role of gender in mediating individuals’ experiences and social life, and thus their participation in social movements. Using feminist theories (such as Connell 1987 and Scott 1988), he argues that the lived experience of gender, wherein beliefs and ideas about femaleness and maleness are ingrained in

the social structure in many different ways, produces differences between women and men's social life experiences. The result is a complex system of constraints and opportunities that powerfully shape the experiences that men and women can have, what they can know, and who they become (McAdam 1992:1213).

South African women's unique (as distinct from their male counterparts') experience of racial apartheid oppression in the workplace and society produced a different set of experiences and expectations of their participation in the labour movement. Participation in the labour movement for women was driven not only by wages and poor working conditions, but the sexism they confronted in the workplace and society was also central to their mobilisation. Gender, as a collective identity, emerges from women's collective experiences of discrimination in the workplace and the broader society. The intersections in their experiences of race, class and gender discrimination are important in the development of an identity separate from their male counterparts within the labour movement.

Women began meeting separately as a collective group within the labour movement from as early as 1983. Although initially these meetings were not officially recognized structures of the labour movement, they served as an important forum for women in discussing issues that were specific to their personal experiences in the workplace and the labour movement (Lawson, 1992). It was through such forums that the experiences of working class women in the workplace, unions and society were documented in publications like *Vukani Makhosikazi* in the early 1980s.

In the larger society, the changes in views regarding gender issues and equality between women and men (within the apartheid society and the imagined democratic South Africa) were important in shaping these women's conceptualisation of their own specific experiences, and also defining their collective identity as working class women activists. This was also influenced by the international context and the dominance of discourses on feminism and women's rights and gender equality. The United Nations (UN) declared 1975 to 1985 the 'UN decade for women.' In 1975, the first UN Women's Conference was held in Mexico City, and the second one was held in Copenhagen, in Denmark in 1980 and the third one in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985 (Joachim, 2007). The early conferences (particularly 1975 and 1980) were marred by conflict and disagreements between women from developed countries and those from developing countries (Joachim, 2007). Disagreements largely centred on the definition of women's issues. The debates in these conferences influenced the agenda and debates within women's organisations in South Africa.

Another significant development was the pledge made in 1985 by the late African National Congress president Oliver Tambo together with Sam Nujoma

(former President of Namibia). Their pledge stated that ‘the struggles for liberation in South Africa and Namibia would not be accomplished without the liberation of women’ (Callinicos, 2004). It is within this context that women developed their own meanings or explanations of the unequal gender power relations within their structural location.

## Research process and methods

To achieve the objectives of the study, two research strategies have been employed. These are firstly archive research and secondly oral interviews.

### *Archival research*

The collection of documents was conducted between 2003 and 2006. I visited the South African Historical Archives (SAHA) at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg first. Access to the sources at SAHA is open to the public, however COSATU documents have a restriction. I had to request permission from the organisation; this was granted without any difficulties. The SAHA archives were easier to peruse though, since there is an inventory of all the documents held in the library. However, they had limited number of documents on the activities of women in COSATU trade unions. As a result, more time (between 2004 and 2006) was spent at the COSATU archives based at COSATU house in Johannesburg. The challenge with their archives though, was that the archives were simply organized in boxes with an indication of what could be in the boxes, but not necessarily specifying all the contents. So this was a very laborious process, which often left me exhausted at the end of each day.

The archive research ended up with the collection of minutes of meetings, discussion papers, policy papers, and conference resolutions of trade unions, journal magazines and newspaper articles. This information was of primary importance in supplementing information that did not come out of the interviews, and providing details about the campaigns on women’s rights and gender equity; it also challenged some of the information from the interviewees.

The process of searching for documents was a daunting one at times. Certain documents on some key events could not be located from either institution. While COSATU House had more boxes (compared to SAHA) that had documents on women, the archives were still dominated by the general activities of the labour movement (even in some of the boxes designated for material on women’s issues). This reflects on the marginal status on preservation of documents on women’s activities in South Africa, particularly women in the

trade unions.<sup>27</sup> It raises challenges for the future of research on women's activities in the trade union movement. It restricts researchers to oral research methods, which has limitations since not all issues can be covered during interviews. Also, some informants have difficulty recalling all the key events and details. This means that unless the preservation of documents on women's trade union activities is improved, we are likely to miss out on some key information and knowledge about women.

#### *Oral interviews and who was interviewed*

I conducted twenty-three (23) interviews with African women from five of the selected unions. These unions include the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA), the South African Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers' Union (SACCAWU), the South African Clothing and Textile Workers' Union (SACTWU), Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (CEPPWAWU), the South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU).<sup>28</sup> All these unions have their historical roots in the early 1970s and it is on this basis that they were selected in this research.

In selecting women for the interviews, I focused on women who became involved in trade unions through shop-floor experiences. All twenty-three (23) women interviewed joined trade unions at the factory level, and their activism began with their election as shop stewards.<sup>29</sup> African women are significant for this particular research because of their direct involvement in workplace and trade union struggles in South Africa. The political nature of the South African society under apartheid meant that Africans and African women dominated most of the factory jobs and the lowest occupations.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, trade union struggles in the workplace in the early 1970s and 1980s largely involved African workers, and this includes African women. Even though COSATU is a non-racial trade union federation, the majority of its membership is African,<sup>31</sup> and African women make up most of the female membership.

Further interviews (five) were also conducted with the gender coordinators of the unions concerned and COSATU as a federation; and three more interviews

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<sup>27</sup> I do take into account that during apartheid repression preservation of documents often posed a security risk and most political organisations, including the labour movement discarded or avoided keeping documents with highly sensitive information.

<sup>28</sup> CEPPWAWU is a merger between Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) and Paper, Printing and Allied Workers' Union (PPWAWU). SATAWU is a merger between the South African Railway and Harbour Workers' Union and Transport, General and Allied Workers' Union (TGWU).

<sup>29</sup> See appendix for details on the interviewees.

<sup>30</sup> The segregationist policies in South Africa have a major bearing on the life experiences of different racial groupings (Hetherington, 1993:247). Hetherington suggests that the magnitude of these differences might also require that African and white women's histories are studied separately.

<sup>31</sup> Seventy percent of COSATU membership is estimated to be African, twenty one percent Coloured or Asian and seven percent White (NALEDI 2006a).

were conducted with women who had been involved at different levels (former COSATU education officer; secretary to former COSATU general secretary and member of the Women's National Steering Committee). An additional seven interviews that have not been cited in the study were also conducted. In total, thirty-eight (38) interviews were conducted.

### *Generational differences amongst the interviewees*

The women who were interviewed in this study are of different generations both in terms of age and the period in which they joined the workplace and the labour movement. The first group is between the ages of 54 to 72 years and experienced the strikes and labour activities of the early 1970s. The second group is in the category of 40 to 53 years. While they were also exposed to the labour activities in the 1970s, as it was the same period in which they joined the labour force, this group was affected by the student protests and community protests of the late 1970s to the early 1980s. The last group is mostly in the 30s and joined the workplace in the 1990s. Although most of them became labour activists in the workplace, a few of them were exposed to and participated in student and community protests during the 1980s. However, this group missed out on the labour activism of the 1970s and 1980s, so their experiences of being activists differ from the two earlier generations. For instance, experiences of mobilising workers or joining the trade union are different for the group of women who came into the unions after the democratisation period.

Mannheim (1970:382) refers to generations as a social phenomenon that “represents nothing more than a particular kind of identity of location, embracing related “age groups embedded in a historical process.” He adds that:

The fact that people are born at the same time, or that their youth, adulthood, and old age coincide, does not in itself involve similarity of location; what does create a similar location is that they are in a position to experience the same events and data, etc., and especially these experiences impinge upon a similarly “stratified” consciousness (Mannheim, 1970:388).

The value of generational differences in this study is not only the age differences of these women activists, but their common location within the history of apartheid and the trade union movement. The thesis is concerned with these women's social experiences of particular events during the period under study, and their interpretations of these experiences. It also highlights how the different political contexts and political opportunity structures influence different responses to similar processes. For instance, as it will be shown, the mobilisation strategies that women use during the different periods are largely determined by the constraints and enabling factors within the political context.

In the interviews, women's experiences and their political and gender consciousness is discussed within a particular historical context. For instance, the generation that became active in the 1970s often refers to police harassment of women brewing illegal beer in the townships, something that was very common during this period. However, for the generation that grew up in the 1980s during the community protests and turmoil, the townships were a 'no-go' area for the police. It was not easy for the police to regulate such activities as they had more pressing issues to attend to. Because they are differently located within different historical periods, these generations of women attribute their political consciousness to different events. Unlike the earlier generations, the generation from the 1980s refers to community politics and protests, student protests and workers' strikes and involvement in community politics during the 1980s.

#### *Life story interview approaches*

In doing this research, my objective is to highlight the role of these women trade unionists in the labour struggles within the workplace and the subsequent formation of the labour movement in South Africa. My aim was for women to provide their own account of the history of the labour movement in South Africa and to locate themselves within this history. I also wanted to understand their motivations for being involved in trade union politics and the struggles for gender equality. Therefore, I regarded not only their experiences in the workplace as significant part of their motivations for joining trade unions and challenging gender inequity issues, but their life stories and social backgrounds. The biographies of these women, their social experiences within the family, in apartheid, racist and sexist society, in the workplace and the labour movement form an intersectional web of life experiences. "The roots of their contentious actions and words, their lived experiences of popular struggles, are sunk in a complex layer of biographical themes that go well beyond their activism..." (Auyero, 2003: 3).

Interviews with women therefore followed the life history approach. In this approach, meanings and interpretations of events are often embedded in the individuals' social context (which is influenced by various factors such as race, gender and class) (Auyero, 2003). In approaching the informants, I was aware that in spite of the common attributes women shared as members of the African working class from the township background, each individual had a unique story to tell in explaining their mobilisation and activism in the labour movement struggles. Their different stories are presented in the form of interlinked themes, which support and corroborate the different experiences of these women. The stories of these women show the process of political consciousness and gender consciousness development through interactions at different levels.

### *The interviews*

In most cases, the researcher had three meetings with the interviewees, with each interview lasting about an hour or hour and half depending on time constraints for the interviewee. Denzin (2001: 199) asserts that qualitative research “is very labour-intensive, especially when fieldwork is conducted over a long period of time, and it is not surprising that researchers usually concentrate on a small group of people.”

The first meeting with the research informants was chiefly exploratory, allowing the informants to talk about themselves, their social background and their union activism with open-ended questions that directed the conversation. Open-ended questions allow women to talk freely and offer their own account of events (Denzin, 2001). This allows research informants to use their own conceptual tools in providing meaning for events within their social context. While these first interviews were aimed at creating a rapport between the research informants and the researcher, they also allowed me to discover information that would not have been elicited by the questions I had prepared for the interviews.

The second and third interviews were follow-ups on issues that arose from the first meeting, and also areas that were not addressed in the earlier meeting. The opportunity to go back to the informants with more questions allowed the researcher to have clarification on issues that were not fully explained in the first interview. This allowed the respondents the opportunity to expand on issues that were not clear in earlier interviews, thus ensuring that the conclusions that the researcher draws in this study are well supported by what was said in the interviews.<sup>32</sup>

### *Challenges with interviews about past events: recollection and reconstruction of events*

Historical researchers are often confronted with challenges of accuracy in the informants' reconstruction or recollection of events. Because some of the events took place a long time ago, there is a problem of forgetfulness or lapses of memory. As a result, when informants recount these events they may not be fully accurate (Auyero, 2003; James 1997). The recollection or reconstruction of events may also be influenced by social changes or circumstances in the informants' personal lives or context. Interviewing research informants about the past allows them to reflect on the events and their actions, and to provide a

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<sup>32</sup> It needs to be mentioned that I did not have the opportunity of going back to all the research informants and getting more information on areas that were not covered in the first interview, or more clarification.

perspective that is influenced by the present social context or circumstances (Auyero, 2003; Portelli, 1992).

But what is really important is that memory is not a passive depository of facts, but an active process of creation of meanings. Thus the specific utility of oral sources for the historian lies, not so much in their ability to preserve the past, as in the very changes wrought by memory. These changes reveal the narrators' efforts to make sense of the past and to give form to their lives, and set the interview and the narrative in their historical context (Portelli, 1992: 52).

Some of the interviewees had difficulties remembering certain events. The information from some of the informants about events in the early 1970s and 1980s was not detailed. In some instance my awareness of the events from the literature or archive resources was useful in jogging the informants' memories. The archive information collected for this research has been immensely useful in filling the details about some of these events.

Memory recollection was not, however, the only challenge faced in the interviews. There was also a process of selective recollection of events and presentation of information in a manner that would correspond with the current political context. For instance, I observed that when I initially interviewed women who participated in the Women's National Coalition (WNC) during the transition process in 1992, they did not mention the tensions and disagreements between COSATU women and the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL). At first the respondents presented a superficial response about the good relations and cooperation between COSATU and the ANCWL. However, when I confronted them with information from the minutes of the meetings amongst COSATU women that contradicted their responses, women started giving me details about these tensions and disagreements.

#### *The social location or positioning of the researcher in the research process*

The production of knowledge or the research process is never a value free process (Neuman, 1997). The researcher's values, ideologies, beliefs and conceptual frameworks influence this process. As a social being with a history, a culture, a language and a certain geographical or contextual background, she brings all these factors into the research process and knowledge production. The social background of the researcher largely informs the research objectives, conceptual and theoretical framework, questions asked and the interpretations of the research (Harding, 2004; Stanley, 1997; Neuman 1997). According to Mama (1995:2):

... There is no such thing as value-free social theory and the goal of intellectual rigor can best be served not by claiming objectivity and ignoring the values underpinning one's intellectual work but rather acknowledging the commitments, motivations and conditions that are likely to have played a part in its production.

My positioning or location in this study as an African woman from a working class background, and also as young person who grew up under apartheid, had a significant impact in the formulation of this research project and also in the outcomes of the study. Having grown up in the township (Naledi, Soweto) during the apartheid years, I have inside knowledge of the experiences described by many of my research informants. I had moments when I was furious and angry about the injustices described by the women interviewed in this research. Because of my shared history of apartheid oppression and racism, I was able to relate to the pain and humiliation described by these African women during the interviews.

#### *Age and cultural background*

My age (32 years) and cultural background as an African woman had an immense impact on the research process of this study. All the women I interviewed (except for two who were also in their thirties) were between the ages of forty and seventy-two.<sup>33</sup> The age difference between the research informants and me meant that the form of address and interaction with them had to be culturally defined. I could not address most of these women (at least those who were in their forties and older) with their first names. I instead addressed them as mama or big sister depending on how old they were.

Maintaining this form of respect was important to me as a researcher because I did not want to be perceived as an educated 'child' without 'proper' manners; and it was not difficult to maintain this form of address, as it is part of everyday life in my interactions within my community or social world. The challenge for me, however, was interviewing women, especially the much older women about marriage, relationships and partners or husbands. These are often regarded as taboo topics for discussion with a younger person. Although most of my informants (mostly the forty-something category) were willing to talk about these issues, in some instances I had some limitations in terms of the extent to which I could probe, and the kind of questions I could pose during the probing. I had to observe the subtle nuances and hesitations as signals that I had overstepped my boundaries. My limitations also stemmed from my cultural background and

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<sup>33</sup> NALEDI (2006a) survey reveals the under-representation of young people under the age of 35 years in the union movement. According to COSATU Report (2006) this can also be attributed to the high unemployment rate within this group.

socialization. At times I was uncomfortable and hesitant to ask certain questions as a result of my consciousness of the cultural boundaries in conversations between elders and young people like myself.

The African context or culture in South Africa often assigns respect and authority on the basis of seniority and age. In my research process, this had an impact on the power relations between my research informants and me. Our shared cultural backgrounds determined the power relations between the research informants, as my elders, and me, as a young researcher interviewing them about their social experiences. These power relations were often used to signal the boundaries of the conversations, as already mentioned above. In some instance the power relations were also used to give warnings or advice about life experiences. An instance of this was highlighted during the conversation I had with Emma Mashinini about her divorce from her second husband, and the feelings of shame she initially experienced resulting from her status as a divorcee.

Not necessarily perceptions, but it is how we are brought up. It is like you are a failure.... I don't know if men feel... like we do ... No one would say anything negative about it [men who are divorced and remarried], it seems as though certain things are for men and not for women. But if you are a woman who wants to stand up for your rights, don't stick it out my child, get out ... find your own way of making yourself comfortable (Emma Mashinini, Interview 2005).

### *Issues of power and authority in research*

Research and knowledge production is a process that is often characterized by power and authority (Mama, 1995). Women, particularly African working class women, are often excluded from this process either as knowledge producers or full participants in the process of knowledge production. According to Mama (1995:66), "...the fact is that the power relations of orthodox research processes have vested complete authority in the scientists who have usually been male and white or western." She continues to explain that:

In other words the power relations of the research process have acted in the same direction as those in the wider society, a fact which must have major effects on what has been perceived and what has not been perceived in the course of research, and so on the type of knowledge that has been generated within this paradigm (Mama, 1995:66).

Research and knowledge production processes as arenas that are still exclusively dominated by the privileged few, has implications for the research frameworks that are often followed in the process of gathering data. The binary oppositions of dominant and powerful versus marginal and weak, or educated and articulate

versus less educated and inarticulate influence such frameworks. Approaching research from this standpoint already assigns research informants a less important role in the research process. It also assigns value to the different social worlds of the researcher and the research informants. The academic social world of the researcher is given more value and therefore authority in contrast to that of the research informants.

However, if the research process is approached differently, as a learning process for the researcher and as an opportunity to gain valuable knowledge from the research participants, the social world and knowledge processes of those being studied becomes more meaningful and of significant value. When the researcher approaches informants with the awareness of the importance of the knowledge that the research informants hold about the phenomenon under study, this assigns significant value and authority to the social world of the informants, their experiences within this social world, and the meanings or explanations they attribute to the social relations and experiences within this social world (Denzin, 2001).

Introducing myself to the research informants for this study, I explained that I was a PhD student who is interested in knowing about the role and contribution of women in the workplace and trade union struggles. I wanted to know about the contribution of women in the formation and growth of the South African labour movement. I also indicated the fact that most of the research that has been done on the South African trade unions places more emphasis on the contributions of men in the founding and building of the labour movement. I further admitted that my interest in doing this research is to bring in the voices of women in the writing of the history of the South African labour movement.

The first question that many women asked me was “what is a PhD?” So I explained that it is a four-year program where I am being trained as a researcher and a scholar and that eventually I will qualify with a doctorate in political science. I also told them of the importance of the interviews I was conducting with them in the whole process of my PhD. The information gathered during the interview process is important for writing my thesis. Presenting myself as a PhD researcher from a prestigious university is not advised in textbook research methods, particularly when one is conducting interviews with working class women (see Mama, 1995). Being from the same community as most of these women (African working class and township background), my status as a university-educated woman is often regarded as a potential threat to gaining cooperation. Working class communities and marginalized groups are often regarded as “not sympathetic to academic research, or to formal interview procedures” (Mama, 1995:68).

I remember in one of the meetings I had with my advisers in South Africa I was asked the question how I was presenting myself for the interviews and I told them that I did mention my status as a PhD student. Comments in this meeting discouraged this approach for fear that it would make my research informants apprehensive about the research. The concern was that I would be regarded as this 'educated' and 'intelligent' individual who had all the information.

Yes, my informants realized my educational qualifications,<sup>34</sup> but at the same time they also viewed themselves as individuals with knowledge and information, which I did not have, in spite of my university training. It is this consciousness that they were trade union activists involved in something significant enough for me, as a researcher, to have the motivation to study and write about in my PhD thesis, and that was the basis of our relationship and interactions. They also felt that they were contributing to my education process. They were more willing to offer help and make themselves available for the interviews to assist me with my "school work" or "school assignment," as some would say, when I contacted them for additional interviews or asking for help in locating other research informants.

While they were aware of the significance of this research for me as a PhD student, these women also acknowledged their personal motivations or interest in participating in this research. These personal motivations were largely influenced by the opportunity to record their experiences and views on trade unions in South Africa. More importantly, I stated my intentions to use their actual names in my thesis, which meant that their stories would not be anonymous,<sup>35</sup> but instead their names would be attached to the views and perspectives they presented during our discussions. This is significant in giving recognition and acknowledgement which many African working class women like those in my research group had never received.

The concern to record their history for future generations to learn from their experiences is shown by the example of a telephone conversation I had with Lydia Kompe to verify her consent in writing about her experiences of domestic abuse and using her real name when quoting from the interviews. In confirming her consent, she pointed out to me that it was important (the discussion on domestic abuse and people coming out and talking about it rather than hiding it) because it is related to patriarchy and how women in the household are oppressed. "It is important that the younger generation knows that these issues of

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<sup>34</sup> I remember my first meeting with Louisa Modikwe. After I introduced myself to her she made a comment about us learning from each other. This was her first opportunity to interact with a person from a university background. She stated her hope that this was going to be a beneficial relationship in which we will both learn from each other or exchange information.

<sup>35</sup> In the first meeting I had with each informant I requested consent to use their actual names in quoting them directly from the interviews, unless the information was too sensitive or they otherwise objected. In 2007 I called the informants again to verify their consent.

domestic abuse are not new, they have always been there. The younger generation needs to learn from our experiences” (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2007).

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed social movement theory. I argue that analysis of social movement processes need to incorporate a gender analysis of the dynamics and power struggles involved in social movement processes. The processes of identifying opportunity structures and the frame for mobilisation are often complicated by subjective opinions of the various social movement participants about the goals of the organisation, and the appropriate strategies to achieve these. Collective identity is critical for social movement formation and collective action against opponents. It is also important to note that movement participants have multiple identities, and these have an impact on social movements. Often, different identities mean that individuals will have varying interests and expectations from the social movement participation. The heterogeneous nature of individuals within social movement is critical for understanding the conflicts and contestations that take place within these organisations.

## Women's activism in workplace struggles

### Introduction

Although the history of trade union organisation in South Africa does not necessarily begin in the early 1970s, this period is the most successful in terms of African workers' organisation in the workplace. In the early 1970s, African workers mounted one of the most effective challenges to employers and the state, demanding trade union rights. Between the early 1970s and early 1980s, workers engaged in workplace stoppages and strikes, challenging bad working conditions and low wages. Although the participation of women in these struggles is hardly acknowledged, this chapter shows that women were also actively involved in these strikes and challenged gender discrimination in employment practices. The first part of this chapter examines workers' demands for trade union representation in the workplace, and employers' initial resistance to these demands that threatened their long period of dominance, control and abuse of African workers. It also discusses the growth of the trade unions after their legalization in 1979, and the challenges faced by trade unions in terms of taking up broader political issues against the state. The second part of the chapter looks at the representation of women in trade unions and in the labour market. It shows that for as long as women have been part of the formal employment sector, they have associated and been actively involved in trade union activities. Focusing on women's trade union activities from the early 1970s, this chapter shows further that South African women have long been challenging their subordination and infringement of their rights. I argue that these struggles illustrate women's gender consciousness and determination to transform the patriarchal relations in

society. Observing the struggles of women in the trade unions, I show that women's activism in the workplace went beyond just being gender conscious to demanding the reorganisation of the workplace through gender sensitive laws that recognized both women and men as equal partners, not only in the workplace, but the family as well.

## African workers' struggles for trade union rights in the 1970s

When the apartheid government came into power in 1948, it had the objective of promoting Afrikaner nationalism through the interests of the business sector and those of the white workers (O'Meara, 1996; Terreblanche, 2002).<sup>36</sup> These were met through various forms of legislation that were to the detriment of the African majority and protected the interests of whites. As they were interested in capital accumulation first, the business sector colluded with the apartheid government in the exploitation of African labour through low wages and poor working conditions. White workers also wanted protection for their jobs against African workers and guarantees for higher wages. In analysing such practices, Von Holdt (2001) has characterized South African workplaces as apartheid workplace regimes.

For the most part, in South African industrial relations, race played a major role (Buhlungu, 2000). The industrial relations in the country were classified as dual, where white workers were legally recognized and protected in the workplace, while Africans did not have any rights in the workplace. Until 1979, only white workers had rights to organize and form trade unions. According to the 1924 Industrial Conciliation Act, African workers were not defined as workers, and therefore were not entitled rights to representation in the workplace (Buhlungu, 2000).

The South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU), which was formed in 1955, adopted what has been termed as political unionism,<sup>37</sup> addressing not only factory floor issues, but also the apartheid regime and its racist policies against black South Africans (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006; Baskin, 1991).<sup>38</sup> As a result, its

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<sup>36</sup>Terreblanche traces the relationship between capital and the state (which he characterizes as symbiotic) from as early as 1934 when D.F. Malan broke away from Hertzog's and Smuts' United Party to launch the National Party (NP). He further argues that the new relationship of cooperation between state and capital was a white and business alliance par excellence. Its explicit purpose was to promote the social (or developmental) interests of white Afrikaners (in their capacity as farmers and workers), and the economic (or accumulative) interests of mainly English speaking whites. In the period until 1948 the symbiosis between the state and capital solved the poor white problem, and launched an industrial revolution (Terreblanche, 2003:276).

<sup>37</sup> See Lambert (1988) for detailed discussion on the concept of political unionism and the history of SACTU. Also see Luckhard and Wall (1980) on the history of SACTU.

<sup>38</sup> SACTU, also laid strong emphasis on the mobilisation of women workers into trade unions, and thus had a number of women in its leadership structures. This tradition was continued by the trade

life span was short, as the organisation was subjected to heavy repression by the apartheid regime in the 1960s. Most of its leaders were imprisoned or forced into exile (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006; Baskin, 1991). In spite of its short period of existence in the country,<sup>39</sup> SACTU laid the foundations of trade union organisation for African workers, and many of its leaders were influential in the mobilisation of workers in the early 1970s (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006).

Trade union organisation in the 1970s resulted in the most powerful organisation of African workers. South Africa was hit by a series of strikes beginning of 1973, with an estimated number of 100 000 workers in Durban taking to the streets and demanding wage increases (Webster, 1988). According to Sithole and Ndlovu (2006:190), the strikes spread to Johannesburg and other industrial centres in the country. Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006:256) point out that “the strikes were mostly short lived,” the most lasting three days or less, and the longest being seven days. Nevertheless the strikes had a major impact, as different factories went on strike at different periods; when one strike was resolved, another started. In Natal, out of the forty-one textile mills, twenty six went out on strike while the other fifteen also had some form of industrial conflict (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006:256). The strikes in the textile industry involved a large number of women, since it is an industry dominated by women workers.

The strikes were largely triggered by the economic recession that resulted in massive retrenchments and unemployment, low wages and rising costs of living (Webster, 1988).<sup>40</sup> Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006), however, caution us that these strikes were more than just about wages or working conditions. They served as an opportunity for workers to vent their frustrations with the political system. The demands for wages and worker representation in the workplace could only be achieved through transformation of the apartheid workplace laws. Workers challenged the government’s industrial relations system and their exclusion from the bargaining system, which disadvantaged their position to negotiate for better wages and improved working conditions (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006; Webster, 1988). The strikes were significant for the workers as they demonstrated unity amongst workers, across different industries and between women and men. It further showed workers the strength of their unity and the potential influence they could have in the workplace as a united workforce (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006). The lesson of the strikes was

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unions that emerged in the 1970s, as they had the objective of organizing as many workers as possible to build their strength in the workplace.

<sup>39</sup> SACTU leadership that went into exile continued the organisation and made links with international trade union federations (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006).

<sup>40</sup> According to O’Meara (1996:176), the real growth rate was negative in the first half of 1976, nil in 1977 and negative again in 1978.

that through collective action, workers could achieve their demands in the workplace. It was through this collective action that striking workers won wage increases and employers addressed their demands for improved working conditions (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006; Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006).

For the employers and the state, trade union organisation was a threat to the economic and political dominance of white people. The state in particular still remembered SACTU's political influence on the working class, and was determined to discourage any black trade union organisation in the workplace. The government amended the Bantu Labour Relations Act in 1973, and introduced the liaison committees to counter trade union organisation (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006). Rather than accept trade union organisation, many employers introduced liaison committees in the workplace; these were joint management-worker bodies. According to Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006:257), by the end of 1973 no fewer than 773 liaison committees had been established. This number increased to 1 482 at the end of 1974, and rose again to 2 503 by the end of 1977.

Employers made the assumption that if workers were involved in the joint worker-management committee, which they viewed as a communication forum with African workers, these would bring workers under control and lessen the occurrence of strikes (Webster, 1988). According to Webster (1985:135) numerous conferences were held by employer organisations to educate management on the need to improve communication with their black labour force by introducing liaison committees.<sup>41</sup>

These liaison committees were not the solution as far as African workers were concerned, since they still could not engage in collective bargaining with employers. The committees only served the purpose of the employers in maintaining control in the workplace. Webster (1988) also notes that the continued strikes, especially in those companies with liaison committees, illustrated black workers' determination to have meaningful representation in the workplace through trade union organisations.

Between 1973 and 1979, a number of trade union organisations emerged. Some of the unions to emerge during this period include the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW); the Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) and the Metal and Allied Workers Union (MAWU) were launched in 1973. The following year (1974), the Chemical Workers' Industrial Union (CWIU) was set up. This was followed by the Catering, Commercial and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA), and Paper, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (PWAU) in 1975 (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006; Sithole and Ndlovu,

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<sup>41</sup> Webster (1985:135) further mentions that experts on 'Bantu culture' were invited to address white personnel on 'characteristics of Bantu people.'

2006). According to Sithole and Ndlovu (2006) by the end of August 1975 about twenty-four African trade unions had been established.

For a long period, employers had unilateral control and power over the labour of African workers. The apartheid workplace laws enabled employers to exploit African workers by paying them low wages and denying them rights in the workplace. In this protectionist context, employers were not eager to accept workers' demands for trade union rights that would threaten their monopoly of control, subordination and exploitation of the African workers (Webster, 1985). Inevitably, African workers spent most of the 1970s after the launch of trade unions struggling to gain recognition rights. Employers relied on the legislation to reject demands for trade union rights in the workplace, and dismissed workers who were involved in trade union activities.

An illustration of workers' struggles against the liaison committees is at the Heinemann Electric Company in Elandsfontein, west of Johannesburg. The organisation of workers into the trade union began in October 1975, and by January 1976, more than three quarters (484 out of 600) of the workforce had signed up for trade union membership (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006).<sup>42</sup> Workers formed a shop stewards' committee and voiced their dissatisfaction with the managements' liaison committee, which could not address their grievances. Members of the liaison committee resigned, and workers boycotted new liaison committee elections twice (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006:278). In retaliation, management dismissed twenty workers including three shop stewards. When workers protested, police were brought in and workers were assaulted. According Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006), the strike was a setback for trade union organisation at Heinemann. The workers who were at the helm of organizing in the workplace were dismissed, and management intimidated all those who remained, threatening them with dismissal if found to be involved with trade union organisation (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006). These were common tactics in the workplace, and as a result it was a great challenge to organize workers during this period. The recession, high unemployment rate and high prices made it difficult for some workers to risk losing even their low paid jobs.

In spite of all the risks involved, trade union organisation and mobilisation of workers continued in most parts of the country. Sithole and Ndlovu (2006) report that following the June 1976 killing of students by the state, there was more industrial unrest.<sup>43</sup> This was also linked to protest actions within the African communities that were organized by the students who were protesting against the

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<sup>42</sup> See also Webster, (1985), Baskin (1991).

<sup>43</sup> The students' protests were incited by government's introduction of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction in African schools as part of its Bantu Education system. The protests started in Soweto where police shot and killed students. The protests spread to other areas of the country.

arrest and detention of their schoolmates. According to Sithole and Ndlovu (2006), African workers supported students' calls for the boycott of white business between August and September 1976. The youths made calls for protests by asking workers to stay away from work. Three protests were organized and the workforce (more than 77 percent in the first two and close to 75 percent in the third one) stayed away from work in support of the students' calls (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006:227). This also marked the beginning of unrest in the townships, which continued into the 1980s (Terreblanche, 2002).<sup>44</sup> Terreblanche (2002) suggests that the government's disastrous handling of the student protests in 1976 set a new path in South Africa's political landscape.

The protests that erupted in the African townships, and the collaboration between students and the working class, represented a crisis for the state. According to Webster (1985:148) more pressingly, the state feared that the resurgence of popular-democratic struggle in 1976 would lead to the re-establishment of links between organized labour and popular struggle similar to those in the 1950s and 1960s. It was this fear that led the state to take drastic measures in trying to find solutions to African workers' demands for trade union rights in the workplace.

In 1977 the government set up the Wiehahn Commission to investigate the African workers' demands and to make recommendations for the Industrial Relations legislation. The commission completed its investigations in May 1979 and made suggestions for the legalization of African trade unions to bring them under state regulation. The commission laid great emphasis on the control and regulation of African trade union organisations. "African unions, it said, are not subject to 'protective and stabilizing elements in this system or discipline and control'" (Webster, 1985:148). The commission went on to argue that "denial of trade union rights ... would constitute a rallying point for underground activity; an industrial relations problem would become a security problem" (Bonner, 1983:18).

In this light, the recommendations of the commission were not aimed at improving work relations between white employers and African workers, or necessarily granting African workers full rights in the workplace. The objective in legalizing African trade unions was to bring them under the control and monitoring of the state and employers. More importantly, the commission wanted to contain worker mobilisation to the workplace and avoid the spill over into political struggles. Webster asserts that:

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<sup>44</sup> For more on the township unrest in the 1980s see Seekings (2000 and 1988); Van Kessel (2001).

Sophisticated strategists for capital and the state had come to realize that a certain form of trade union recognition could facilitate a separation of the 'politics of production' from 'global politics', thus hoping to weaken the role that organized workers could play in the national democratic struggle (Webster, 1988:179).

While the unions were initially sceptical about legalization and the requirement to register their organisations within the industrial relations system, the legalization process had advantages for their growth and expansion in the workplaces (Baskin, 1991; Bonner, 1981). When the Wiehahn commission made its recommendations in 1979, the African trade union movement had already gained considerable growth. The Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU) was launched in April 1979, a month earlier than the deliberations of the commission were made known. At the launch the federation had a total of 45 000 signed-up members (Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich, 2006).

The legalization of trade unions however, opened the space for greater mobilisation and strengthening of African trade unions. This led to unprecedented trade union growth levels in the 1980s (Baskin, 1991; Webster, 1988; Bonner, 1981). According to Terreblanche (2002), the Manpower Commission report of 1982 shows that African union membership of registered trade unions grew from 56 700 in 1980 to 260 000 in 1981.

#### *The growth of the labour movement after legalization*

The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) was formed in 1985, largely consisting of those unions established in the early 1970s. The formation of COSATU in 1985 brought together all the unions that were organized under FOSATU and other trade unions that initially opted to remain independent. For instance, CCAWUSA initially refused to be affiliated to FOSATU because of its disapproval of the dominance of white intellectuals in trade union leadership.<sup>45</sup> The launch of COSATU in 1985 brought its membership to a total of 462 359 paid up members (Buhlungu, 2000).<sup>46</sup>

In the period between 1985 and 1991, COSATU and its unions experienced sharp growth in membership levels. Macun and Frost (1994) argue that the manufacturing sector made most gains in COSATU trade union membership between 1985 (147 672) and 1991 (672 951).<sup>47</sup> Relative growth over the same

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<sup>45</sup> For debates on white intellectuals in African trade unions see Buhlungu (2006), Maree (2006) and also Mashinini (1989).

<sup>46</sup> COSATU is currently the largest federation in South Africa, followed by NACTU (is mainly African and influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement ideology) and FEDUSA (is largely white and consists mostly of white unions which organized separately during apartheid) respectively.

<sup>47</sup> These include CWIU; Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU); NUMSA; Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers Union (PPWAWU) and South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) (Macun and Frost, 1994).

period shows a massive 38 percent in unionisation for all employees, 10 percent in 1985 to 48 percent in 1991 (Macun and Frost, 1994:79). COSATU membership growth during this period can also be attributed to the unionisation of the public sector as recent studies indicate<sup>48</sup> (Buhlungu, 2006; Naidoo, 2003).

In 2003 COSATU membership was estimated at 1 770 155, with 21 affiliated unions. This represents an increase of about 34.3 percent from 1994 estimate of 1 317 496 (Naidoo, 2003). This growth is attributed to the public sector growth that is currently estimated to constitute a third of the total membership of COSATU unions (Buhlungu, 2006; 2001). This is a noteworthy change from the earlier period when COSATU membership was largely drawn from the manufacturing and mining sectors.

### *Trade unions and politics in South Africa*

Initially, after the legalization period, FOSATU and its unions concentrated on building strong shop-floor worker organisations and gaining recognition agreements in the workplace. Its affiliates were winning recognition in many plants, and achieving concrete improvements by challenging unfair dismissals and low wages (Baskin, 1991:29). These struggles in the workplace were winning them favour with the workers, and there was growing confidence in trade union organisation after the 1979 Wiehahn decision.

FOSATU avoided direct involvement in politics outside the factory or within African communities. This decision was partly influenced by the state's regulations on non-political affiliation or involvement in political activities outside the workplace. Also, the earlier experiences of SACTU in the 1950s, and the state's brutal repression of its leadership and the organisation itself, impacted on this decision (Baskin, 1991). As a result, in 1979 when FOSATU was launched, unions were still divided on the issue of political involvement. The unions that opposed affiliation to FOSATU and its position on workplace struggles laid emphasis on the fusion of worker struggles with the broader liberation struggles. These unions, which were largely community based, still had strong ties with SACTU leadership (Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006; Baskin, 1991).

The launch of COSATU in 1985 however, brought these unions together. The launch was preceded by unity talks between FOSATU unions and the community unions, which had allied themselves to the United Democratic Front (UDF).<sup>49</sup> The differences between the two camps were characterized as populists (those

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<sup>48</sup> For instance new unions in the public sector like the South African Democratic Teachers' Union (SADTU) and the National Education, Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU), which recruited professional workers emerged in the late 1980s.

<sup>49</sup> The UDF was formed in 1983 in response to the government's plans to introduce a tri-cameral parliament system as part of its divide and rule strategy. The system aimed at including coloured and Indians, together with the whites in the parliament system, excluding Africans (Seekings, 2000).

who aligned with the national struggles) and workerists (being those who concentrated only on workplace struggles). Baskin (1991) explains the distinctions between the two camps below:

Populists tend to argue that racial oppression is the central contradiction within society. Class differences, while often acknowledged, are devalued and held to be of lesser importance and the struggle is seen as being against the apartheid oppression in all its forms. This requires the unification of all classes and sectors of the oppressed by the regime.

Workerists, by contrast tend to see racism and apartheid as a mask concealing capitalist exploitation. Racism is simply a tool of the ruling class used to enhance the division and exploitation of the working class ...cooperation with other classes is likely to compromise working class objectives. While class alliances are not ruled out in principle, workerists tend to underestimate them or view them with suspicion (Baskin, 1991:96)

With increasing political protests in black communities, and the continued economic recession, trade unions found themselves being drawn into the political sphere. The lack of adequate education, housing, medical, unemployment and welfare benefits, coupled with rising prices and rents, led the trade unions to an alliance with students and community groups to play a leading role beyond the workplace in the struggle for democracy and political rights (Jaffee and Jochelson, cited in Webster, 1988:194). The countrywide protests in 1984 and the invasion of Black Townships by the troops in response to the protests played a significant role in pushing the labour movement into community politics (Baskin, 1991). When COSATU was launched in 1985 it adopted a political approach and aligned itself with the national liberation struggle. The following is a statement made after the adoption of the resolution on trade unions and national politics.

The political and economic crisis in the country had resulted in unemployment, starvation and degradation, as well as violent repression. This repression, hardship and suffering affected workers not only at their workplaces, but in every other aspect of their lives and within the communities where they live (cited in Baskin, 1991:92).

## African women and formal labour markets

South African governments (during the colonial period and the apartheid era) perceived wage labour as the reserve of men, with women being more suitable for work in the domestic sphere. The apartheid regime's policies on the employment of women, and mainly African women, were largely premised on capitalist notions of the division of labour. Such notions have promoted the

separation of the domestic sphere (associated with women) from capital's production sphere (associated with men).<sup>50</sup> This kind of division of labour has been used to justify the discrimination and exclusion of women from the labour markets.

For most of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the formal economy was open only to men, while women remained behind in the rural areas (Berger, 2007). In the early 1920s, with the growth of the industrial sector, the economy slowly opened up for women, mainly white women.<sup>51</sup> African women were still confined to the rural areas, with a few employed in the domestic sector.

It was mainly from the early 1950s that the industrial sector opened up to African women, although this was still limited. Assessing employment trends in the textile sector, Du Toit (1978) reports that while white workers constituted 65 percent of total employment in 1933, this figure dropped to a mere 16 percent in 1950.<sup>52</sup> The number of African (and coloured) women in wage labour continued to increase, especially from the 1960s onwards, as the industry experienced labour shortages, particularly in skilled areas of the economy.

The economic growth in the 1960s (5.5 percent a year during the decade) resulted in a shortage of labour in skilled occupations (which were reserved for whites only), forcing employers to demand the relaxation of the job colour bar<sup>53</sup> to allow African men to fill the vacancies (Terreblanche, 2002). Yielding to the pressure from business, the government allowed the colour bar to be a 'floating bar,' which permitted traditionally white jobs to be fragmented and/or reclassified (338).<sup>54</sup>

The government not only encouraged the employment of African men in skilled positions, but it also encouraged the employment of African women in unskilled positions in industry. By 1970 a significant 25 percent of African women were employed in the industrial sector (Bernstein, 1975). Many of the women were employed in what were regarded as traditionally women's

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<sup>50</sup> The division between the public and the domestic sphere has not always been clear-cut. Pateman (1989:132) points out that although the total exclusion of women from public life has never been possible, their inclusion has always been defined by their subordinate status within the domestic sphere, patriarchal beliefs and practices. This thesis has already demonstrated in chapter one, efforts by the state to reinforce patriarchal domination and control of women, through pass laws for instance.

<sup>51</sup> According to Walker (1991), between 1924 and 1925 women constituted 15 273 of the total workforce. African women were estimated at only 709 of this total number.

<sup>52</sup> Du Toit (1978:34) points out that the investigations by the Board of Trade into whether the industry required job reservation legislation found that the sudden change was not caused by the replacement of white workers with African labour. The whites had moved out of the industry into more lucrative employment, and white girls who had taken clerical jobs during the war remained in them.

<sup>53</sup> A job colour bar was a system that reserved skilled and well paid jobs mainly for Afrikaners and the white English speaking population.

<sup>54</sup> White male workers felt threatened by the opening up of skilled occupations to African men. According to Berger (1992:258) white men preferred white women to fill the shortages in skilled labour.

occupations such as food processing, footwear, clothing and textile industries, domestic service and agricultural sectors. These are sectors considered as requiring minimum skills (because of their association with women's domestic activities), and therefore less monetary value was placed on them.

African women workers' wages were the lowest in comparison to those of other workers. In 1973, those earning less than R10 per week included 61.9 percent of African women workers, 28.3 percent of coloured women, 24.8 percent of Asian men, 12.5 percent of African men and 7.1 percent of coloured men (Berger, 1992:254). Berger (1992) asserts that an examination of the occupational levels of the workers surveyed indicates that the differences in wages were largely based on gender and racial discrimination.

The discrimination of women in training and skilled occupations further increased the division of labour within industries and the labour market, with women often dominating in areas with less pay. A survey of 1 200 workers in manufacturing in 1987 found that overall women were receiving about 73 percent of men's average earnings, even though on average women had slightly more formal schooling (Standing et al., 1996:412).

Evidence also suggests that most employers preferred men to women in allocating training opportunities and skilled occupations (Standing, Sender and Weeks, 1996). Standing et al (1996:402) highlight that the 1991 Population Census reports that only 30 companies indicated having employed women in apprenticeship positions in 1988. And a survey that was conducted in 1995 (a year after the democratisation of the country) indicated that only 23 percent of women were receiving training in the workplace.

## Representation of women in COSATU unions

South African women constitute a significant part of the labour movement. The national estimates show that 28 percent of women within the formal sector belong to trade unions, not much less than the 36 percent of their male counterparts (Makgetla, 2004). Although statistics on gender representation levels for the earlier period of trade union formation are not available, there is evidence to indicate considerable women membership of trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s. This is illustrated by the participation of women in the strikes during this early period, and the demands made by women through the unions for gender equality in the workplace.

Nevertheless, the representation of women in the leadership structures of COSATU does not reflect the composition of its membership. As with male dominated organisations or trade unions in most parts of the world, women rarely make it to the top levels of the federation or trade unions. In 1997, women's

representation in the National Executive Committee was estimated at seven percent, and only eight percent of women occupied national office bearer positions (COSATU, 1997). At the regional leadership level women constituted only 15 percent.

Even though women are sidelined in the leadership structures of the unions, their membership in COSATU is increasing. In the early 1990s Baskin (1991) estimated women's membership within COSATU unions to be around 36 percent. A recent survey that was conducted by COSATU puts women's membership within COSATU at almost half (47 percent) the total membership (NALEDI, 2006a). This is remarkable growth, and surely has implications for the transformation of the labour movement in terms of debates on gender equity and women's access to leadership positions. There are no available accurate (or reliable) statistics on the current status of women at senior COSATU leadership positions.<sup>55</sup> Table 1 below shows women membership in different COSATU affiliates.

*Table 1 women membership in COSATU affiliates (percent)*

| <b>Unions</b>       | <b>Women</b> |
|---------------------|--------------|
| NEHAWU              | 54           |
| NUM                 | 6            |
| NUMSA               | 20           |
| POPCRU              | 50           |
| SACCAWU             | 59           |
| SACTWU              | 70           |
| SADTU               | 53           |
| SAMWU               | 41           |
| Other COSATU unions | 57           |

Source: NALEDI (2006a)

The growth in women membership within COSATU unions can be explained by the changes in the employment sector. With the changes in the economy and the impact of globalisation, employment in female dominated sectors such as services has been on the rise, while sectors like mining and manufacturing have been experiencing decline (Altman, 2006). Table 2 below shows the distribution of employment over a five-year period.

<sup>55</sup> This reflects poor monitoring and evaluation of gender equity policies and implementation within the federation and its affiliates.

*Table 2 Distribution of employment by industry (percent)*

| <b>Industry</b>               | <b>2001</b> | <b>2002</b> | <b>2003</b> | <b>2004</b> | <b>2005</b> |
|-------------------------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|
| Mining                        | 5.0         | 5.0         | 4.8         | 3.5         | 3.3         |
| Manufacturing                 | 14.5        | 14.5        | 13.6        | 14.7        | 13.9        |
| Construction                  | 5.7         | 5.4         | 5.8         | 7.1         | 7.6         |
| Trade                         | 12.9        | 19.4        | 21.3        | 21.8        | 24.6        |
| Transport                     | 4.9         | 5.1         | 4.7         | 4.8         | 5.0         |
| Community and social services | 17.8        | 18.1        | 19.1        | 18.1        | 17.1        |

Source: Statistics South Africa (2006)

The Labour Force Survey shows that trade industry (which includes wholesale and retail sectors) and community and social services industry have the highest share of total employment (Statistics SA, 2006). Manufacturing, mining and construction have the lower share of total employment. In terms of unionisation rates, mining (76 percent) and manufacturing (33 percent) are still the mostly unionised sectors (Altman, 2006:24). However, trade (19 percent) and community and social services (59 percent) sectors also constitute a higher unionisation rate when combined. This is significant for explaining the growth in women's trade union membership within COSATU affiliates.

The COSATU unions' report (NALEDI, 2006b) also shows some losses in membership within male dominated unions like the National Union of Mine Workers (NUM) and the National Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA). For instance, NUM has experienced six percent decrease in membership over the years. Although NUMSA experienced growth (from 173 000 members in 2003 to 217 000 in 2006), the union has remained below its 273 000 level recorded in 1991. Female dominated unions, however, have made considerable growth. The South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers (SACCABU), has experienced 20 percent growth in the same period; the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) membership has also gained three percent between 2003 and 2006 (NALEDI, 2006b).

## Women and trade union struggles in South Africa

The history of South African women's involvement in labour struggles goes as far back as the 1920s with their involvement with Industrial and Commercial Workers Union and the Women Workers' General Union, and in the 1930s with the organisation of the garment and textile workers (Berger, 1983). Berger (1983:52) argues that "in the early part of the latter decade, thousands of white

and coloured<sup>56</sup> women in these newly expanded industries came out on strike in an effort to stave off wage cuts resulting from the Depression and to gain some control over their wages and working conditions.”<sup>57</sup> From the late 1930s, a large number of semi-skilled and unskilled workers, including women from the sweet and tobacco industries, milliners, and food and canning sector were organized by women leaders from the garment industry, with the help of organizers like Ray Alexander from the Communist Party (Berger, 1983).

With its formation in 1955, SACTU emphasized the importance of solidarity between women and men in the struggle against exploitation in the workplace and the national liberation struggle (Luckhardt and Wall, 1980). With the growth of the manufacturing industry in the 1950s, a significant number of African women became full-time wage earners.<sup>58</sup> It was from this period onwards that women like Rita Ndzanga, Fraancis Baard, Elizabeth Mafekeng, Mary Moodly, Viola Hashe, and Liz Abrahams became active leaders in SACTU unions.

The new unions that emerged in the early 1970s had their foundations in their predecessor SACTU unions. They mobilised on the principle of organizing all workers in the workplace in order to have power against management. Several women mobilised into trade unions in the early 1970s and took leadership roles in mobilising fellow workers into unions within their workplaces. Women like Emma Mashinini, Lydia Kompe, Maggie Magubane, Thembi Nabe and Refiloe Ndzuta among others, were leading figures in the early struggles of the trade union movement (Tshoaedi, 1999). The writing of the history of trade unions in South Africa has been biased towards men,<sup>59</sup> with women’s significant contribution in the process of building the labour movement not being acknowledged sufficiently. However, evidence indicates the vitality of women’s

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<sup>56</sup> These women were the first to be allowed full time employment by the state.

<sup>57</sup> African women’s association with trade unions can be traced to early 1919 when Charlotte Maxeke (the first African woman university graduate, a member of the South African Natives National Congress executive (Wells, 1983:56) and founder of the Bantu Women’s League in 1918 (Kimble and Unterhalter, 1982)) made attempts for the ICU to organize the small number of African women who were in the industry (Berger, 2007).

<sup>58</sup> With the growth of the manufacturing industry in the 1950s, African women employment grew in significant numbers, particularly in the textile and clothing and the food and processing sectors. There was also a corresponding growth in unionisation. Workers in the textile industry were first organized by the Garment Workers’ Union, while the food and processing sector was organized by the African Food and Canning Workers Union (for more details see Berger 2007, 1992 and Luckhardt and Wall, 1980).

<sup>59</sup> Berger (1983:49) notes that most scholars in the earlier period (20<sup>th</sup> century) have often concluded that women’s responsibilities in the family impact on the extent to which women could commit themselves to labour movement organisations in the workplace. She argues that these scholars insist that in spite of being full-time wage earners, women’s assigned roles in the family “leaves them less prone to identify themselves solely as workers and therefore less liable to commit to working class activism.”

participation in the labour movement, even before the unions that emerged in the early 1970s.<sup>60</sup>

The emergence of trade unions in the early 1970s is largely characterized by strikes over wages and demands for trade union recognition, as already indicated. Women, as they were already part of the labour market and, as indicated above, were the most affected by low wages, participated in union activities during this period. In describing the working conditions at a garment factory where women workers made up 70 percent of the workforce, Mashinini (1989) discusses the low wages<sup>61</sup> that African women were subjected to, and the management's unilateral decisions over wages. Mashinini (1989:19) explains that, "I think the strikes that meant the most to me were in the early 1970s when we fought to earn an extra cent, and also to narrow our hours ... We were fighting for a forty hour week and in the course of the fight we did go out on strike."

Women's involvement in labour movement activities of the 1970s is also highlighted in disputes over trade union recognition rights in the workplace. One case in point involved 230 coloured women workers at Eveready who went on strike after the company had ignored an ultimatum to recognize the union and negotiate employment conditions (South African Labour Bulletin, 1979:25), including opportunities for promotion.<sup>62</sup> Another example cited by Berger (1992:259) involved three hundred workers (mostly women) at the Turnwright Sweet Factory in Johannesburg who staged a walkout in protest over working conditions in August 1974.

Upset at first over a unilateral management decision to change the time at which the factory gates opened in the morning, workers soon began to shout for wage increases, to complain about long working hours and about the need to clock in and out when they went to the bathroom, and to voice their wish to be represented by the Black Allied Workers' Union (Berger, 1992:259).

Although in most of the strikes, discontent over wages featured prominently, the gender discrimination suffered by women in the workplace often came under the spotlight. It was during such periods that women often had the opportunity to voice their frustration over gender discrimination and the humiliation to which they were often subjected in the workplace. The South African Labour Bulletin (1980)<sup>63</sup> report on the textile strike at Frame Factory (in Durban, Kwa-Zulu

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<sup>60</sup> See Berger (2007; 1992; 1983); Tshoaedi (1999); Mashinini (1989); Baard (1986); Luckhardt and Wall (1980), Du Toit (1978).

<sup>61</sup> She also highlights the implications of low wages for women, which meant they could not contribute to the Unemployment Insurance Fund. This meant that when women were out of work, (which affected them in higher rates since they were discriminated against in terms of the labour practice during this period) they had no access to any income.

<sup>62</sup> Work in Progress, 1979, No 10 (pp 25).

<sup>63</sup> South African Labour Bulletin, 1980, Vol. 6, No.5 (pp17-48).

Natal) in 1980, where women composed about 60 percent of the workforce draws attention to some of the gender specific experiences of women. The main demand reported in the strike was a wage increase of 25 percent, which the workers won.<sup>64</sup> However, analysing the events of the strike and explaining the massive support for the strike, demonstrate the depth of discontent demonstrated by women workers over their working conditions.

Reporting on the strike, South African Labour Bulletin (1980) highlights some of the problems that women workers faced at work. The first related to the occupational structure whereby men dominated the supervisory positions, while women were concentrated in the lower grades that paid low wages. Often, some of the men used their positions of power over women for sexual favours. Secondly, women at this factory were required to undergo a medical check-up, which included a pregnancy test before being offered a job. It is further reported “once they are employed, if the factory doctor detects a pregnancy, even at six months, he will recommend that the woman be dismissed immediately” (South African Labour Bulletin, 1980:29). After the strike, however, there was an agreement between the workers and the employer to re-employ women after childbirth.

The strikes in the early 1970s and 1980s involved large numbers of workers in industries like textile, retail and food processing, which are dominated by women. However, an analysis that takes into account women’s voices is largely missing from the writings on workers’ strikes during this period. In most cases researchers during this period focused mainly on the economics (wages) or politics (workers’ rights and trade union recognition rights) of the strikes, which, in their definitions, excluded women or gender specific issues.<sup>65</sup> Thus in trying to understand the gender dynamics of the strikes during this period using these earlier sources (academic research, books and journals), one is often limited in terms of understanding the motivations of the total workforce, since only one group’s views is presented.

Wages are a critical issue that impacts on all workers (including women) and most have been mobilised on this basis. It is also important to acknowledge that women’s motivations for participation in protest actions go beyond the traditional workplace issues of wages and working conditions. Their gender specific experiences of these same issues, and other issues that only affect them as a group, are important mobilising factors in their trade union activism and involvement in protest actions.

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> See for instance Sithole and Ndlovu (2006); Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006); Baskin, (1991) and Webster, (1988).

## Women challenging gender specific issues in the workplace

The significant increase of women in paid labour during the 1970s and early 1980s was vital in terms of garnering support and raising awareness of the injustices they suffered as a group. Their concentration in certain industries (such as retail or food and processing) and workplaces was important in creating suitable conditions for women to identify their experiences as a group. Women, who took up union leadership positions and challenged gender specific issues, often came from sectors or workplaces that were dominantly female. Examples include Emma Mashinini and Maggie Magubane. Before launching CCAWUSA in 1975, Emma Mashinini first became a worker representative in the textile factory where she worked<sup>66</sup> and Maggie Magubane was also a worker representative at the Biscuit Factory where she worked before becoming the General Secretary of Sweet Food and Allied Workers Union.<sup>67</sup>

The presence of women in the labour movement in the early 1970s shaped labour struggles within the South African workplace, giving it a different dimension. The discrimination of women on the basis of gender in the workplace brought up new challenges for the labour movement. As part of the working class, women challenged the unions as well as management in addressing their particular interests as a group. Some of the most important issues that women raised included demands for equal wages, access to training opportunities and demands for maternity leave and childcare.

### *Demands for 'equal pay for work of equal value'*

In challenging discriminatory practices in wages, women made a call for 'equal pay for work of equal value' (Baskin, 1991). For instance, in 1981, textile workers (the National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW))<sup>68</sup> reached an agreement with South African Fabrics to close the wage gap between women and men workers in the industry.<sup>69</sup> In another incident, in 1984 CWIU women in Elandsfontein challenged management's practices of placing women in the 'bottom grade' with the lowest pay.<sup>70</sup> Women, who composed half of the workforce, were placed in this grade, while men were in different grades that paid higher wages.<sup>71</sup> After pressure from women who raised the issue with the

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<sup>66</sup> See Mashinini (1989:18).

<sup>67</sup> FOSATU Worker News (undated).

<sup>68</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1981.

<sup>69</sup> Another example in which women challenged unequal pay was in 1986 when CWIU workers engaged in a three week strike at the Mining and Industrial Rubber Company challenging the differences in pay between women and men who performed similar tasks. As a result of the industrial action, women gained a 54 percent increase, putting the wages at the same level as those of their male colleagues (cited in COSATU Women's Subcommittee Meeting, June 1993, COSATU Archives)).

<sup>70</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1984, No. 31.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

union, management was forced to scrap the grade and pay women the minimum rates, equivalent to those of male workers.<sup>72</sup>

At its launch in 1985, COSATU raised the demand for a living wage for all workers. But it was not until 1987 that the Living Wage Campaign took off, with the aim of challenging poor wages earned by the black working class. The demands of the campaign included a living wage for all, an end to tax deductions, a 40 hour working week, job security, a minimum of six months paid maternity leave, an end to the hostel system<sup>73</sup> and decent family housing near places of work, decent education and training.<sup>74</sup> The campaign noted the exploitation of women as well as the racial and gender discrimination they suffered under the capitalist and apartheid system.<sup>75</sup> It provided women with the opportunity to highlight the discrimination of women in the labour market.<sup>76</sup>

Baskin (1991) argues that COSATU's call for a living wage resonated with the feelings and experiences of the working class concerning the low wages and inflation (resulting in high commodity prices), which the country was undergoing at the time. He further asserts that during 1987 almost six million working days were lost through strike action (excluding stay away from work actions). One of the most noted strikes involved the retail sector, which is dominated by women workers (Baskin, 1991:248). It is estimated that about 11 000 workers from OK Bazaars and Hyperama (both retail supermarkets) went on strike for ten weeks to demand a living wage.<sup>77</sup> In the end, women won a significant increase (R100) that applied to everyone in the workplace. In his address to the opening of the COSATU women's conference in 1988, Chris Seopesengwe who was the chairperson of the NEDCOM then, argued, "the militancy of the OK strike set the tone for COSATU's Living wage campaign which shook the state and the bosses" (5).<sup>78</sup>

The campaign was a useful opportunity for women to challenge employers' notions that only men were breadwinners. In one of the campaign's pamphlets it

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<sup>72</sup> Baskin (1991) observes that the struggles over equal wages have met with resistance from employers, who often placed women and men in different grades with different pay. In such instances, women have been placed in the lowest paid grades. In some instances, like in the case of NUTW reported above, a year later employers had replaced women with men. Baskin (1991:378) reports that there were only two women left in the company, both serving tea.

<sup>73</sup> The apartheid's hostel system mainly provided accommodation for migrant workers in the cities, excluding their families. Workers in these places lived in squalid and overcrowded conditions, without any privacy, making family life impossible (for a full discussion of the dynamics of this accommodation system see Ramphela, 1993).

<sup>74</sup> COSATU Second National Congress (1987:19), (COSATU Archives).

<sup>75</sup> Ibid (1987:20).

<sup>76</sup> The campaign also gave women the opportunity to highlight the plight of many women who were concentrated in low skilled jobs where trade unions did not organize, such as domestic service and the agricultural sector (COSATU Women's Subcommittee meeting, June 1993 (COSATU Archives)).

<sup>77</sup> This has been noted as one of the longest strikes in the history of South African labour movement activities (See Seidman 1993).

<sup>78</sup> COSATU Women's Conference (1988:5), (COSATU Archives).

was stated that “women workers, just like men workers, need a living wage to provide decent housing, education, food, clothing, transport and leisure for themselves and their families. Women workers have special reasons to join the fight to win these demands.”<sup>79</sup> The pamphlet highlights two major points: firstly, women were also workers, and secondly, they are responsible family providers, something which the state, employers and the general society fail to fully acknowledge.

Under apartheid laws, married women and single women were taxed differently from men. The Income Tax Law regarded men as responsible breadwinners (regardless of their marital status), and therefore taxed less.<sup>80</sup> Unmarried women were taxed higher than men, but married women’s tax was the highest, based on the notion that they had husbands to take care of them.<sup>81</sup> The Living Wage Campaign served as a springboard in challenging these sexist notions and raising public awareness of gender inequality in the government’s legislation. Through the campaign women questioned the basis of being taxed at a higher rate whilst they did not have much influence in the economic decisions of the country.<sup>82</sup>

While the demand for a 40-hour working week was important for all workers, it was most important for women workers, as they were most likely to be employed in sectors where employers unilaterally enforced overtime work. In her biography, Frances Baard (1986:21) points out that at a canning factory, work started at six in the morning and went on until it was all done, even if it meant finishing work at ten in the evening. For many women like her, this was too strenuous and inconvenient, as they had to walk long distances in the dark on their way back home, which was often not safe. It also interfered with their family life and involvement in their children’s lives.<sup>83</sup>

The Living Wage Campaign also reflected on gender discrimination in education and training opportunities, which were often reserved for male workers. As already indicated, employers often preferred men to women for training opportunities and skilled occupations (Standing, Sender and Weeks, 1996). Standing et al. point out that fewer companies reported women employed in apprenticeship positions in 1988. This, as emphasized above, has significant implications for the differences in wages between women and men.

In objecting to the gender inequalities in education and training opportunities, women raised several issues that not only related to the workplace. Firstly, the

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<sup>79</sup> ‘Women Workers Join the Fight for a Living Wage’, COSATU Pamphlet (COSATU Archives).

<sup>80</sup> The taxable income of a married woman was calculated on the basis of her own income together with that of her husband, which pushed her into a higher income tax bracket (Smith, Undated source).

<sup>81</sup> COSATU Women’s Sub-committee meeting, June 1993 (COSATU Archives).

<sup>82</sup> COSATU Women’s Conference, 1988 (COSATU Archives).

<sup>83</sup> As will be shown in the discussion below, women in the trade unions made demands for a right to a family life.

issue of unequal opportunities (for girls and boys) in the schooling system, which was promoted by the apartheid state, and the society's biased (in favour of boys) cultural norms, were raised.<sup>84</sup> Secondly, women argued that education and training opportunities for women in the workplace, and the unions as well, were crucial to improving the conditions of women within both arenas. Lack of education and training were identified as major obstacles in improving the poor status and positioning of women within society, the labour market, and the labour movement.

In an address to a conference for the International Food Unions held in Geneva in 1983, Maggie Magubane, who was then the General Secretary of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union, argued that management's reluctance to giving training to women was linked to the idea of not regarding women as permanent members of the workforce.<sup>85</sup> Magubane pointed out that managements were often reluctant to train women to get better jobs 'because women did not stay in jobs long enough to make training them worthwhile.' According to her, this also indicated that women were being discriminated in training opportunities because they had to take time off work in situations of pregnancy and childbirth.

*Women have a right to be workers and mothers:<sup>86</sup> the struggle for maternity and child-care rights*

Although women's presence and the demand for their cheap labour continued to increase from the early 1970s through to the 1980s, the employers and the government continued to regard their involvement in the labour force as temporary. Both government and employers rejected suggestions to recognize women workers' rights in the workplace. Their rights in the workplace therefore, were not protected, and women were subjected to various forms of discrimination. The Wiehahn Commission, however, made attempts to alleviate this situation after its conclusion of the investigations into the 1973 strikes. As part of its recommendations for the transformation of the labour relations system in South Africa, the Commission made the recommendation that women's right to return to work after childbirth be guaranteed (Barrett et al, 1985:114). This recommendation was rejected by the government, citing the cost implications for the employers.

Both employers and the state still perceived the workplace in masculine terms whereby all workers are men and do not require time off for childbirth. Management's attitude towards women was that "women must either work, or they must stay at home and have babies" (Speak, 1989). Reports by women

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<sup>84</sup> Women and the Living Wage Campaign Booklet (COSATU Archives).

<sup>85</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1983, No. 21.

<sup>86</sup> This is an argument made by Khosi Maseko who was National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW) shop steward (quoted from the COSATU Worker News publication in 1984).

indicate that in some cases women were made to sign declarations, which stated that they were not pregnant at the time of being employed, and that should they become pregnant within a certain period, their services will be terminated immediately.<sup>87</sup> In one of the women's meetings reported in the FOSATU Worker News (1983), a shop steward stated that 'the problem is clear, if you get pregnant that's it, the boss fires you.'<sup>88</sup> Khosi Maseko (1984) therefore concludes that "maternity then becomes retrenchment through the backdoor." According to her, women's economic need to keep their jobs often puts women in a situation where they would go to any lengths to protect their jobs.<sup>89</sup> In most cases this often included 'back street' (illegal) abortions,<sup>90</sup> and some women fastening their stomachs tightly to hide their pregnancy (and in some cases this has endangered their unborn babies) (Maseko, 1984). It is under such circumstances that many women workers raised their concerns about the lack of protection for their jobs and maternity rights.

In articulating their demands for maternity rights, women argued that the issue involved both women and men. 'Everybody has the right to have children, and both men and women are involved' is one of the statements made by women during this period.<sup>91</sup> The demand for maternity rights was therefore framed in terms of workers' rights. Similar to the common workers' demands in the workplace, such as wages, demands for maternity rights are economic demands. It is a demand for continued access to means of earning an income to support their families. This was also a demand for employers to recognize women not only as substitutes in the workplace, but an integral part of the labour force with a meaningful role to play.

Women's struggles for maternity rights and job protection feature prominently in the early trade union strikes, as illustrated earlier by the 1980 Frame Factory workers strikes. In 1981 the Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union (SFAWU), which at the time was led by Maggie Magubane as the general secretary, signed an agreement with Kelloggs Company.<sup>92</sup> The agreement offered workers 33 percent payment of wages for a period of 12 weeks and the opportunity to be placed first if any vacancies opened while the woman was ready to return to

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<sup>87</sup> Report made by a CWIU shop steward at a women's group meeting (FOSATU Worker news, 1983, No 25).

<sup>88</sup> FOSATU Worker news, 1983, No. 25.

<sup>89</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1984, No. 30.

<sup>90</sup> Based on these experiences, working class women in South Africa have been very vocal on matters of women's health and women's access to health services. The call for the legalization of abortion and free access for all women resulted from the realization of the dangers to many working class women who faced risks of infections, infertility and, in the worst cases, death from the illegal abortion procedures (see resolutions of the 1988 COSATU Women's Conference).

<sup>91</sup> Speak Magazine, 1984, No.6.

<sup>92</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1981.

work.<sup>93</sup> Although the agreement was limited in terms of guaranteeing women their jobs after childbirth, it opened the way for women's struggles on maternity rights.

Scholars like Baskin (1991:376), however, put emphasis on the CCAWUSA agreement in 1983 with OK Bazaars as the "first major breakthrough" in the struggle for maternity rights. In 1983, the retail sector union, SACCAWU, (formerly known as CCAWUSA), which was mainly dominated by women workers, successfully negotiated a maternity agreement that gave women a full guarantee of having their jobs back after childbirth. The union's first agreement on maternity rights was with OK Bazaars (one of the former major retail stores in South Africa). With the new agreement women had a one-year's unpaid leave and a guarantee of retaining their jobs (Baskin, 1991; Bird, 1988). While I agree with Baskin (1991) that this was a major gain in women's struggles for maternity leave, the maternity agreements achieved prior to the CCAWUSA agreement are still fundamental in terms of placing women's interests on the agenda of workers' struggles in the workplace.

The gains that women were making in some workplaces were vital in mobilising women to be proactive in protecting their rights to employment. For instance NUTW women shop stewards at Whiteheads, a textile factory in Tongaat, Kwa-Zulu Natal, sought information about how to best negotiate a maternity agreement after hearing about the successes made by unions like CCAWUSA.<sup>94</sup> Many of the women in the area were breadwinners in their households, and the housing rent in the area is reported to have been high. Loosing their jobs was therefore detrimental for their continued access to housing.

The presence of women in considerable numbers in particular workplaces is useful in explaining the increase in gender specific demands. This was limited not only to the female dominated sectors or industries, but it was also witnessed in male dominated sectors such as metal, where in some cases women constituted a substantial number in certain workplaces. In some of these workplaces, women acted in solidarity to enforce their demands for maternity rights in the workplace. For instance, in 1984 an estimated 200 workers at Motor Assemblies near Durban stopped work for about two hours in support of a demand for guaranteed re-employment after giving birth.<sup>95</sup> This took place after one woman who was pregnant was forced by management to go on maternity leave without any guarantee of re-employment. It was after this incident that their union, the National Automobile and Allied Workers' Union indicated its attempts to take it

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Speak 1984, No.6.

<sup>95</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1984, No. 3.

up with the Motor Assemblies management. The motor employers' maternity agreement was reached in 1988 (Adrienne Bird, 1988). It allowed six months guarantee of re-employment for women who have worked for an employer for two years (Adrienne Bird, 1988:4).

The success in maternity agreements boosted women's struggles for maternity rights as increased numbers of workers continued to make demands on their companies. Bird (1987), for instance, reports that during 1986 CWIU won twenty maternity agreements in the Gauteng region (then known as Transvaal) alone. One of the chemical sector companies in Kwa-Zulu Natal, the NCS Plastics Company in Pinetown, also signed a maternity agreement in 1984, which not only guaranteed women workers' jobs, but also allowed fathers two days off work for the birth of a child. According to Dorothy Budokwe, who was a shop steward with the CWIU in the company, the inclusion of men in the agreement was in recognition of the fact that maternity rights are for all workers.<sup>96</sup> This finding challenges Baskin's (1991),<sup>97</sup> which credits CCAWUSA for having negotiated the first paternity agreement with Metro Cash and Carry in 1985.

One of the significant achievements in women's struggles on maternity rights was the industry wide maternity agreement in the metal sector (a male dominated sector) in 1986.<sup>98</sup> According to Bird (1987:19), this was South Africa's first national industry-wide maternity agreement. It allowed women six months paid maternity leave, and a guarantee that they could return to their job after giving birth. This achievement came as a result of pressures from the women workers within the sector, who pushed the Metal and Allied Workers' Union to include the demand in their national sector bargaining (Bird, 1987).

Women's demands for maternity rights in the workplace should be regarded as key in the struggle for gender equality in the South African context.<sup>99</sup> This facilitated an opening (though still limited) in the public space for debates about childcare and domestic responsibilities.<sup>100</sup> These debates also assessed critically the expected roles of employers and the state in the provision of childcare facilities, as well as the involvement of fathers and/or husbands in such responsibilities.

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<sup>96</sup> FOSATU Worker News, 1984, No. 31.

<sup>97</sup> See Baskin (1991:376).

<sup>98</sup> Bird (1987:19) points out that the metal sector at the time employed 332 000 workers, mostly men. Women were mainly (about 2000 out of 10 000 workers) concentrated in the electronics and telecommunications as machine operators in the assembly line.

<sup>99</sup> See Appolis, (1998) Daphney (1995) and Lacom (1991).

<sup>100</sup> For example from the early 1980s there was an increasing number of writers (see Cock, 1980; Cock et al, 1985; Barret, et al 1985; Lipman, 1984; Perold, 1985) focusing on women workers. Even publications like the South African Labour Bulletin, which traditionally focused on workplace related issues, featured articles on women workers from the mid-1980s. See also (Mashinini, 1989; Baard, 1986; Kuzwayo, 1996) personal accounts of black women.

Within the unions and in community women's organisations, discourses revolved around the notion of triple oppression (race, class and gender) and the double shift faced by black women.<sup>101</sup> This popularised discussions amongst women in the labour movement about their experiences in the workplace, the unions and the family. For instance, in one of the women workers forums in 1983, Thembi Nabe (who was initially a shop steward and later general secretary of MAWU (now NUMSA)) addressed the meeting and discussed the various tasks (including cleaning, cooking/preparing food for the family, attending to children) that women often have to carry out at home while the husband is just sitting reading a newspaper.<sup>102</sup> She went on to discuss the issues of bedroom politics between a husband and a wife, and the expectation that a woman always has to accede to her husband's sexual desires or face physical abuse. Lydia Kompe (who at the time was a union organizer for TGWU) also went on to criticize the institution of marriage and the constraints it placed on women in terms of their activism in the unions. Supporting Nabe's argument, Kompe condemned men's refusal to be involved in household chores, thereby refusing to lessen the burden for women workers. She argued that the burdens that women face in the family, in terms of control by their partners and the chores they are expected to perform have a detrimental effect on women's activism in the labour movement. "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" (11).<sup>103</sup>

#### *Demands for parental rights and childcare*

From the late 1980s, there was a shift from demands for maternity rights to parental and childcare rights. This kind of framing directly challenged the gendered division of roles in childcare. While challenging the non-involvement of men in childcare, this was also a challenge to the workplace legislation, which did not facilitate the involvement of fathers in childcare. It was a critical assessment of the state, employers and the society's views on childcare, demanding not only a change in attitudes but the legislation as well. This was also an opportunity to place parental rights and childcare rights on the agenda of the labour movement as working class issues rather than as women's issues. Framing these issues as workplace issues that concerned workers in general indicates women's demand for the commitment of all workers in the labour movement in the struggle for recognition of these rights.

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<sup>101</sup> CCAWUSA News, 1989 (SAHA Archives).

<sup>102</sup> South African Labour Bulletin, 1983, Vol. 9, No.3.

<sup>103</sup> South African Labour Bulletin, 1983, Vol. 9, No.3 (pp11).

In September 1990 COSATU women organized a national childcare campaign, which involved all the affiliates.<sup>104</sup> Workers from all over the country brought their children to work as part of the campaign, with the slogan ‘workers are parents too.’ The aims of the campaign included:

- Raising the issue of childcare with employers and the public in general.
- To ensure that childcare demands are part of the living wage demands, which are negotiated at plant (company) and national levels.
- To get workers and employers to accept that childcare should be a social responsibility.
- COSATU also says that childcare should not be the responsibility of women alone and should not be privatised (Speak, 1990: 6-7).

Women further made demands to the employers and to the state respectively, for a special paid leave of 20 days each year to take care of children (when they are sick or have problems at school), crèche facilities, special child allowance from the state for unemployed workers with children, and the right to family life (6). In their demand for the right to family life, women also contested the definitions of family that prescribed that it should constitute both the father and the mother. They insisted that the definition should be broadened to include single and unmarried parents.<sup>105</sup>

In an interview with Speak (1990), Maggie Magubane, one of the women leaders of the campaign pointed out that “male parents must also be given time off by employers to care for their children” (4). In the same vein, Sibongile Masangwane (who was a shop steward for the TGWU) also argued “when we are talking about childcare we are saying that even male comrades must have things to do with the child. We are not the only ones responsible for the child just because we are mothers” (6).

The demand for childcare facilities like crèches in black communities was a central issue for working class women. Documented evidence describes the unfortunate circumstances (young children being left unattended or with adults who are not fully capable of looking after the children), with which most working class women are confronted (Barrett et al., 1985). Women like Frances Baard (1986)<sup>106</sup> and Emma Mashinini (1989) have documented their struggles

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<sup>104</sup> Speak, 1990, No. 32.

<sup>105</sup> Minutes of the National Women’s Committee meeting, February 1993 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>106</sup> Frances Baard was involved in the early organisation of trade unions in the fruit canning factories in Port Elizabeth (in the Eastern Cape), in the 1940s. She was also active in the ANCWL and a founding member of FSAW. In 1956, along with many other women involved in the organisation of the women’s march, she was arrested. She was charged with treason and was only acquitted in 1961 (Schreiner, 1986).

with childcare and fulltime employment. Baard was widowed and staying with her daughter's (who had a job in a different city) children and Mashinini recently divorced and a single parent. Baard on the one hand relied on hired help, while Mashinini on the other hand was assisted by a neighbour.

The availability of extended family members in helping with childcare was limited for most women in the cities. Other than the fact that South Africa had strict pass laws that required Africans above the age of 16 to be employed, African wages were very low (while the cost of living in the cities was high). This made it difficult for households to meet their basic needs and therefore, most family members were likely to take on opportunities for employment. The role of extended family members in providing assistance with childcare was therefore not available for many women in the urban areas.

The emphasis that African women have often placed on the family has led some analysts to regard this as regressive and not feminist (Charman et al., 1991; Posel, 1991; Campbell, 1990; Bozolli, 1983; Wells, 1983; Walker, 1982). Women's actions and demands have been regarded as conservative and 'collusion with patriarchy.' These writers highlight the inadequacy in challenging patriarchal relations in society and within the family. However, such conclusions have failed to analyse accurately the substance of the demands that women were making. In this instance, women were making demands *to have a family*. The state's refusal to make workplace laws that recognize workers' (both women and men) rights to family life and employers' complacency were questioned. Women were therefore challenging the privatisation of the family and childcare, demanding the intervention of both the state and the employers. The demand for legislation that recognizes men's rights to be fathers, and to have a meaningful role in childcare and household responsibilities, is progressive. It challenges the assigned gender roles within the family.

## Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the re-emergence of trade unions in South Africa in the early 1970s. Poor working conditions, low wages and lack of proper representation in the workplace characterized workers' struggles during this period. The chapter underscores the active involvement of women in the strikes that dominated South Africa's industrial relations in the early 1970s and 1980s. It demonstrates that in as much as these strikes have been portrayed in masculine terms, they also had a large gender component. Women's involvement in these strikes challenges the traditional definitions of labour issues or workplace politics, and the frameworks that analysts have followed in examining these events. Similarly, women workers' demands in the workplace also

challenge definitions of women's struggles or issues as limited to the family or relations within the institution of marriage.



## Roots of activism: using social biography in explaining political and gender consciousness

### Introduction

I am an African and my politics did not just begin in the trade union movement, but they go a long way back... When the uprisings in 1976 happened, I was already a politically conscious person (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2004).

In this statement, Masangwane suggests that her social background as an African is critical for us to fully understand her political motivations. Her statement further implies that her trade union activism is informed not only by the politics of the workplace, but it is also connected to her social surroundings that are dominated by the broader politics of discrimination under apartheid. The significance of this statement lies in Masangwane's ability to signal the importance of her social background or social location in explaining her political activism and involvement in trade union struggles in the workplace. The biography of individuals, their history and social background is important in explaining their actions. The motivation to participate in collective action or in social movement action is not influenced by a single event, but multiplicities of events that take place over a certain period of time are critical in forming or shaping individuals' consciousness.

This chapter explores the observations and experiences of women of racial and gender discrimination under the apartheid state. It also examines gender relations in society as well as within the family. I suggest therefore, that the experiences of women in these various arenas are critical in explaining women's mobilisation in trade union activism and subsequently their struggles against gender inequalities. To gain a deeper understanding of women's social actions it is essential to understand not only their current context or the influences within the current context, but also the importance of their biographies.

"I am a product of forced removals;<sup>107</sup> my parents were forcibly removed twice. That opens your eyes and that does make you see things differently. Just the separate development makes you to be anxious and to start questioning things around you" (Emma Mashinini, Interview 2004).

## Observations of apartheid oppression in the 1950s to the early 1970s period

Emma Mashinini was born in 1929 in a white neighbourhood known as Rosettenville, South of Johannesburg. In 1936 her family experienced the first forced removal from Prospect township, which was earmarked as an area for white settlement, and later on they were removed from Sophiatown with apartheid's introduction of segregationist laws in the 1950s. Mashinini's statement "I am a product of forced removals" was in response to the question about her political consciousness and how that came about. In explaining her role in the labour movement and her role in fighting against the apartheid government, Mashinini refers to the forced removals of her childhood, illustrating the impact that this experience had in terms of her awareness of injustice and inequality.

Similarly, Lydia Kompe mentioned her childhood experiences of apartheid and the feeling of bitterness created by these experiences. Lydia Kompe, affectionately known as Mam' Lydia, grew up in the rural Limpopo, then known as northern Transvaal. Until 1954, when apartheid government forced them off the land, her family survived and earned their income from their crops and livestock. She explains:

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<sup>107</sup> After 1948 when the National Party came into power, it implemented a string of policies that institutionalised racial discrimination. For instance it introduced the Group Areas Act, which dictated residential areas according to race, and the introduction of the Bantu homeland system. With the Group Areas Act, the government instituted forced removals of black people from areas designated white areas (O'Meara, 1996).

Yes, my father was a peasant and we had fields and my father used to farm. We used to have crops and cattle. That's how we grew up...until 1954 when they introduced what they called a 'betterment scheme' and they took away our cattle and donkeys ... We were not allowed to keep stock because they said they were destroying the grass. So we were left with nothing ... We just became poorer and poorer because we were left with only 6 cattle out of the many cattle that my father had. And we had accumulated the cattle from ploughing and selling potatoes. We had such a lot of cattle and we were left with nothing. For each cattle that was taken away we were given 1 pound. We really became so poor until my mother came to the city to work as a domestic worker. And when I finished my Junior Certificate (grade 10) there was no money for me to continue with my studies to complete my matric (high school diploma) (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

As Kompe states, the dispossession of their livestock left her family poor, forcing her mother to seek work in domestic service. Domestic work has always been the lowest paid employment and many women found it difficult to meet fully the needs of their families from their meagre wages. As it will be shown later, many African families could not afford to educate their children, who often ended up in unskilled jobs in the factories or the domestic sector like their parents. The dispossession and the poverty that resulted from it became a source of anger for Kompe that led her to take a leadership position in trade union organisation in the 1970s. When asked why she became involved in trade union activities, Kompe referred back to her experience of dispossession by the apartheid government:

I think that thing of the betterment scheme when they took away our stock, actually left a stigma in my head. I became so anti-white; when I saw them I just became so furious inside. It gave me such bravery, when I saw them I blamed them for my situation because I felt that if it were not for them I wouldn't be a factory worker. I thought I would go to Botchabelo, a Lutheran teachers' college (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

For Kompe, the white people in the workplace, who were often in positions of authority over African workers, were synonymous with the apartheid regime. White people represented the same system that deprived her of the opportunity to get an education, condemning her to working in the factory.

Maggie Magubane was born in Springs, in the east of Johannesburg in 1944. Her mother also worked as a domestic. She says "that [apartheid] was painful for us, there was that segregation." Magubane often accompanied her mother to her work at weekends. Being at work with her mother enabled her to observe the inhumane treatment to which her mother was subjected on a daily basis by her white employers. She was not allowed to eat inside the house, to "use the same kitchen utensils with white people" or to even "keep her things inside the house"

(Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004). Magubane further commented about the unfair working conditions and low wages, to which her mother was subjected:

She [her mother] used to talk about how she was being treated at work, that she never had time for lunch. Sometimes she would come back with her lunch pack and tell us that she had to make sure that she finishes all the work before she knocked off. So such things made me question why she was supposed to work under such conditions and at the end of the day there was not enough money. My hatred started there, I grew up hating white people and even at work then I observed similar things. I noticed that we were not treated as human beings. (Question) And that pushed you to become an activist? Yes (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

Being of the generation that grew up during the 1950s when the apartheid government came into power, these women were the first to experience apartheid's segregationist policies. Although they witnessed the earlier forms of protests, such as those against the passes, these protests did not last long. In the 1960s, after the Sharpsville massacre, the banning of all political organisations and arrest of most political leaders, including Nelson Mandela, African political activity was subdued.

As shown in chapter one, it was in the early 1970s that political activity in South Africa resurfaced. Unlike the generations of Kompe, Magubane and Mashinini, the generation that was the "youth of the 1970s" witnessed a different political context. With the workers' strikes and the organisation of African trade unions, followed by African students' protests against the imposition of Afrikaans in their schools, the 1970s presented new opportunities for political mobilisation and participation in protest activities.

Sibongile Masangwane was born in 1954 in Alexander township.<sup>108</sup> Growing up in this township, she was surrounded by political activities and talks about the everyday realities of apartheid for people in her neighbourhood. According to Masangwane, growing up in such a context "exposed" her and from a very early age made her aware of the political situation in the country. She narrates in the following:

It was from where I grew up ... A child who grew up in Alexander was exposed to politics at an early age because we grew up seeing political marches and the political songs would be sung during those marches. We would follow the marches. And you would hear the talk as well, for instance grown ups talking about an elderly person who had passed away and did not have a passbook because he was a member of the ANC. We would listen to all this talking as

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<sup>108</sup> Alexander Township is geographically on the north-east of Johannesburg. It is known to have been home to some of the leading political figures like Nelson Mandela and the late Walter Sisulu, and thus had a strong political activism. The township has a history of engaging in various political protests against the apartheid regime (see Callinicos, 2004; Sisulu, 2003)

children... And that contributed to one's political thinking. So I think the ... surrounding environment contributed to my political consciousness (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2004).

Alina Rantsolase, who describes herself as the “youth of the 1970s”, started working in 1977 for Checkers, one of the large supermarkets in South Africa.<sup>109</sup> She had just finished her high school when the 1976 student protests against the imposition of Afrikaans language in African schools erupted. As the “youth of the 1970s”, she was angry about the apartheid education system, which was then called Bantu (referring to Africans) education, that denied her the opportunity to learn and understand the subjects. For her the workplace was structured similarly to the apartheid society where Africans were segregated from whites and subordinate to white people. She went on to explain her frustrations with the apartheid education system:

It was very difficult to learn in Afrikaans. I did all my subjects in Afrikaans and as a result I don't know all the subjects I studied in high school because we learnt to cram everything, instead of learning to understand. I should think that built up the anger in me. I was angry at what the Boers were doing to us. And as you know, we still had segregation whereby there were separate entrances for Africans and the whites. So even when I started working black people were expected to respect a white person (Alina Rantsolase, Interview 2004).

However, her feelings of anger against the apartheid regime and white people did not only emanate from her experiences in the 1970s. Growing up in the rural areas, where her mother was a domestic worker on a farm made her resent white people and the inhumane manner in which they treated her mother.

You know when I was young I used to go with my mother to work in the farms as a domestic worker. There was a big tree where she hung her blanket and her other things. You see, you clean the house, you cook for them but when they offer you food, they will give you tea in a tin and bread with jam and you go and sit outside. You could not eat from inside their house. The same food that is cooked by you, you cannot eat, the house that is cleaned by you, you cannot eat from inside it and the dishes that are cleaned by you, you cannot use them for eating. So this leaves you with a lot of questions, the white children my mother had to call them ‘klein baas’ and ‘klein missis’ (little master/boss and madam). So all those things make you what you are. You couldn't forgive a white man... all those experiences make you very angry (Alina Rantsolase, Interview 2004).

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<sup>109</sup> According to her, the 1976 student protests in the country were important in terms of making her aware of political organisation and the power of mass political organisation.

Indeed, as Masangwane pointed out earlier, the political context in the townships was important in raising awareness for many of the women interviewed in this research. This was also the case for Elizabeth Thabethe who is also from a black township Katlehong in the East Rand, East of Johannesburg. Born in 1959, Thabethe is of the generation that witnessed women's struggles against the authorities for the illegal brewing and selling of traditional African beer from their homes. In explaining her political consciousness and her involvement in politics, Thabethe describes conversations at home about the police harassment and the condemnation of her mother and aunt.

Partly I used to listen to my mother; we lived in the township and they used to talk about police harassment, and the arresting of those women who were selling mqombothi (traditionally brewed beer).<sup>110</sup> We used to stay with *mma mogolo* (maternal aunt who is an elder sister) and they used to talk about the problems affecting black people in our township. For instance, there was this one lady in our neighbourhood who was a single parent and unemployed. She sold mqombothi in her house and also at the firms [outside working places]. My mother and *mma mogolo* would talk about her and how unfairly she was being treated and harassed by the police. At that time I did not understand but I would just hear all these talks. I would hear them talking about *congoroso* [congress referring to the African National Congress which was then a liberation movement] and Nelson Mandela and I would ask what is the *congorose*. They would tell me 'no my child, we are not supposed to talk about such things; we would be arrested just like Nelson Mandela. That will get you into trouble'.<sup>111</sup> (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

The decisive moment for Thabethe was the student uprisings in the 1976. Although at the time she was still not very clear about the politics in South Africa, the education system did not make sense to her. "And when they explained the system to us, we were keen to participate in protest marches..." (Interview Thabethe, 2004). Therefore she was one of the students who were mobilised in the protests against the education department at the time. She explains that:

... We also realised that the education system did not make sense. How could we learn all our subjects in a language that we could not understand? We still had to face the hurdle of learning the language before we could learn the subjects. And even the teachers could not teach us in the language since they could not understand it. My understanding of the liberation struggle began

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<sup>110</sup> Luli Callinicos (1987:207) describes the dangers faced by women who brewed beer and their encounters with the police who branded them criminals, since it was illegal to brew or sell beer.

<sup>111</sup> During the apartheid years, it was illegal to talk about the ANC or to mention names of political figures. That kind of talk, as Thabethe's mother and aunt warned her, could lead one into serious trouble with the authorities.

there. I was forced to leave school in 1977 because of the uprisings that started in 1976 (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

The school environment was indeed crucial in raising awareness for some of the women interviewed in this research. Nomvula Rain Chiya was born in 1952 in Kwa-Thema, Springs. When I questioned her about her educational background she responded thus "... I will leave out the primary schooling because I think the high school is more important ... that is where my activism began" (Nomvula Rain Chiya, Interview 2004). Chiya studied at a boarding school in Kwa-Zulu Natal in the late 1960s until 1972 when she was expelled for her involvement in political activities. It was there where she became aware of the abnormal political context and started asking questions.

So there was this guy (I have forgotten his name, I'll remember later), so most of the time he came with all the topics. But at first we were not aware that it was political. And I liked having debates. The guy was Kenridge Stofile. So he grew up with his father being a political figure and always under police surveillance. His father was under house ban. So every time when we were together he would come up with unusual stories, and he would tell us about the political figures like Mandela, Sisulu and the others and what was going on with them. And at school we were not allowed to be in big groups. But we would meet maybe during lunch at the shops and then he would brief us (Rain Chiya, Interview 2004).

Unlike her peers who would listen in when family members discussed the political context, Chiya said that her father was never interested in discussing politics or even explaining to her about what was going on. She points out that although they were aware that even their parents did not receive a good education, "...with our culture we could not talk to our parents about such issues". She explains that:

... I would discuss these things with my father and ask him questions about the apartheid, why they were treating black people badly and why were they forcing Bantu education on us. My father would tell me that he ...does not want to bother himself about the Boers because they were beating them up and calling them kaffirs. And I did not even understand what kaffir meant at that time<sup>112</sup> (Rain Chiya, Interview 2004).

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<sup>112</sup> This was common for many of the African children in urban areas who grew up mostly in their own surroundings with only black people. For most of them, their direct experience with racism would be in the workplace, or if they had to interact with the government administration, which often happened when they reached adulthood.

Although the cultural issues that Chiya refers to above relate largely to the authoritarian relationship between parents and children during this period when children were not encouraged to ask too many questions, there is also a gender element in these issues. She highlighted this point further, “my father is Baca (an ethnic group) and therefore you could not engage with him about political issues especially as a girl. He was very traditional” (Nomvula Rain Chiya, Interview 2004).

## Observations of apartheid oppression during the 1980s

The 1970s was crucial in politicising most of the youth as the stories above demonstrate. As it will be shown in the following discussion, the spirit of defiance and resistance to the apartheid regime, its racist and segregationist policies, continued through to the 1980s. As with their counterparts in the earlier periods, the youth growing up during the 1980s was mobilised into political activism. Many of them were also angered by the injustices they experienced in their surroundings.

The pass laws for women came into effect in the early 1960s after many years of women’s opposition.<sup>113</sup> As mentioned in the previous chapter, pass laws restricted the movements of Africans. Violet Seboni was born in 1965, a few years after the pass laws were extended to African women. Like her counterparts in the earlier years who detested the pass laws and fought the government’s plans to impose the laws on women, Violet Seboni felt “angered” by the imposition of these laws. Violet Seboni grew up in Benoni, a township in the East Rand. Explaining her route into political activism, she describes her difficulties in obtaining a permit to enter the white suburbs to visit her aunt, who was employed as a domestic worker:

I was very angry like any other youth at that time [in the 1980s]. What made me angrier was the introduction of the Bantustans. One time my grandmother sent me to go and ask for money from my aunt in the white suburbs (she worked as a domestic worker). I was required by law to have a permit to enter the white suburbs. So I had to go and apply for a pass, but when I got there I was told that because I was MoTswana (an ethnic group), I did not belong in the Transvaal and was therefore supposed to go to the former Bophuthatswana Bantustan and obtain my pass from there. So I was refused a pass and instead given a travelling document since I was not a ‘citizen’ of the Transvaal (now Gauteng Province) ... I was very angry and ... furious. You became angry

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<sup>113</sup> Savage (1986: 181) argues that the long struggle women waged against the extension of influx control measures shows how seriously affected they were when forced to carry passes in 1963, and when in 1984 an embargo was placed on their entry into urban areas unless they were in possession of a 72 hour visitor’s permit or a labour contract.

against the system, and supported any calls to boycott or challenge the regime (Violet Seboni, Interview 2005).

Seboni describes her anger as a youth growing up in the early 1980s. This was a context that differed from the other generations growing up in the earlier periods (1940s-1970s). The 1980s as already stated, was a period of mass organisation and mass community protests in South Africa. Since the 1976 student protest, the youth were heavily involved in the campaigns against the apartheid regime and boycotts of institutions or businesses that undermined Africans or the fight against apartheid.

Selina Tyikwe, who was born in 1968 in Katlehong, was one of the youth who were “very active in the Katlehong Youth League” which was a community organisation. She points out that her awareness of trade union politics was highlighted during her activism in community politics during the mid 1980s.

That is when I got exposed to labour politics. Remember then we had the mass democratic movement? We had structures that met with COSATU. I was then exposed to labour politics during that period (Selina Tyikwe, Interview 2004).

This was a period of intense political struggle when African communities and the youth were engaged in massive protests concerning poor services in the communities, shortage of houses and overcrowding, high rents and so many other issues, including poor African education system and unaffordable fees. COSATU, as the only organisation with legal state recognition, played a prominent role in community politics by collaborating with communities in protests and boycotts of certain institutions or companies. As it was one of the most respected organisations in African communities, COSATU also assisted in providing political direction in some of the campaigns or political protests. According to Tyikwe:

COSATU played an important role by creating a forum for engagement. They used to have local offices in Katlehong, we had the youth league, the civic organisation and we met at the community level, and then on Thursdays we all met at the COSATU level. We also used to have structures for campaigns, we would identify campaigns and that would be discussed at the COSATU meetings and tasks would be delegated. And then if you had campaigns, you would need the involvement of workers (Selina Tyikwe, Interview 2004).

Miriam Khumalo, who hails from Dube, in Soweto Township,<sup>114</sup> is one of those young people who were also influenced by the political uprisings during the 1980s. Born in 1963, Khumalo was still in high school when the major political uprising in the 1980s took place. She explained her experience and observation of the political context in the following:

You understand that experiencing all these things, it motivated me to challenge the system ... You understand growing up in that environment that was surrounded by activism? At that time, the liberation struggle was heating up [in 1986] and lots of people were getting arrested. My brother was one of those who were arrested. The police would come to our house to harass us, looking for incriminating documents. So we grew up in that surrounding and we wanted to do something also, maybe go into exile (Miriam Khumalo, Interview 2005).

Unlike her counterparts who grew up listening to conversations about the political situation in the country, Hilda Matjee was raised in a very protective family that wanted to keep her away from the political activities in the country during that time. She points out that even though her father, who was a priest, often helped political activists to hide from the police in her home, “my parents did not want us to know much about what was going on, so they kept information from us and never talked to us about what was going on” (Interview 2004). To further protect her from the political climate in the townships during the mid-1980s, her parents sent her to a boarding school in Polokwane, then known as Pietersburg, in the northern Transvaal (now Limpopo).<sup>115</sup> In spite of all these attempts by her parents to keep her from being involved in the politics, Matjee became involved in student politics and became part of the Student Representative Council (SRC). Away from her parents’ supervision, Matjee was eager to become part of the political action and to understand more about the political struggles in South Africa (Interview 2004).

In 1989 when she was doing standard nine [grade eleven] and her school protested against the arrest of fellow students, Matjee and her fellow student leaders were arrested for about two weeks. They were tortured and beaten by the police during this period and then released without any court hearing. This was the point of no return for Matjee. “So automatically I felt that there was no turning back after that whole experience, forward we go” (Hilda Matjee, Interview 2004).

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<sup>114</sup> SOWETO is an abbreviation of South Western Township. It was created in the early 1940s with the urbanisation of Africans, and further expanded in the 1950s with the introduction of segregation policies that removed Africans from areas designated for whites only. As one of the largest townships in the country with the largest urban African population, it took the leading role in the challenge against apartheid repression.

<sup>115</sup> Her parents believed that political activity in this region was not as volatile as in the Johannesburg region during this period.

The interviews in this research show that the youth that grew up in the 1980s definitely had a different political context compared to that of the previous generation. Their context of massive political protests and organisation exposed them to unlimited information about the political system in their country. Unlike their counterparts in the earlier periods, involvement in organised politics, for some of them, begins with the community and student organisations. These are developments that took place largely in the late 1970s and the early 1980s, which means that for most of the earlier generation it would have been impossible to have this kind of opportunities.

In contrast to the generation that went into the workplace in the period before the 1980s, most of this generation (the majority started working in the late 1980s and 1990s) was therefore more informed about political organisation and trade unions. Their late entrance into the workplace also meant that trade unions were already well established and well entrenched in the workplace culture. The earlier generation however, has the advantage of having the opportunity of participating in the building and mobilisation of the trade union movement in the early 1970s and the 1980s. Thus while they went into the workplace without much political organisation experience, they gained valuable experience in mobilising and organising trade unions in the workplace.

## The sexist nature of apartheid laws

Apartheid and its racist policies were central in the mobilisation into political activism and the political consciousness of many of the women interviewed in this study. Nevertheless, their experiences as women within an apartheid society that had strong sexist beliefs raised their awareness of gender discrimination in various spheres of their lives. Their experiences of gender discrimination are not only related to the apartheid regime and the broader society, but also to the family and to their personal relationships with men. As it will be shown later, these experiences have informed their gender consciousness as well as their fight against gender inequalities in their social surrounding.

Apartheid, as a patriarchal institution, safeguarded and promoted the domination of women by men. As already shown in earlier chapters, the system institutionalised a set of rules and regulations that were targeted at subordinating women, particularly African women, making them dependents on their fathers, brothers, husbands or even their own sons. This was more evident in rights to property ownership regulations.

Lydia Kompe is largely known for her union activism and her outspokenness on gender inequalities in the workplace and the labour movement. She describes:

... a situation whereby my son was accorded more respect than me, that if I wanted to own property and was unmarried, it would be registered in my son's name instead. Women were not given access to land; they could only get that through their sons. *As a woman you remained a dependent always, to the extent of being a dependent to your own child whom you gave birth to* (her own emphasis) ... And when one's husband passed away, the woman could not claim ownership of the land unless she has a son who could take over ownership. And in the cities it was the same also, women were chased out of their houses once the husband passed away. And in many cases women ended up homeless, especially when the sons got married. *It is just a perpetuation of patriarchy* (her own emphasis) ... these are things that really made me angry, especially in the rural areas (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2006).

Elizabeth Thabethe, who is from an urban area, also stressed the difficulties women faced with regards to accessing housing and their rights to keep their houses when their husbands passed away.

During apartheid, we were minors, even the house permit had the husband as the head and the woman would be listed like the children ... A woman could not own a house, even if she could afford it. She had to be married to own a house. If you were a married woman, when your husband passed away, you could not keep the house (Elizabeth Thabethe, 2005).

Women in the rural areas suffered the worst forms of gender discrimination, particularly during the apartheid period. It was difficult for women to join the labour market, as most employment opportunities were concentrated in urban areas, and with the influx control regulations that were introduced as part of the pass control measures to regulate the presence of Africans in the cities, women were often confined to the rural areas. Thus many of these women depended on remittances from their husbands in the towns. Lydia Kompe describes her experiences in the rural areas while her then husband remained in the urban areas:

...The life that I had experienced at his place in the rural areas had an impact. The life there and the way we were treated as women, as married women ... I observed all these and did not like the kind of life that women are living in the rural areas. We are so discriminated against but we are made to work like donkeys. We do all the dirty work, you must go and plough, hoe, harvest,

carry water, fetch wood and men are just sitting drinking alcohol under the tree. And I was busy observing all these things (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).<sup>116</sup>

According to Joyce Pekani (Interview 2004) the subordination of women to men also extended to their economic freedom. For instance, women could not make expensive purchases, such as household furniture or a car, without a man's signature (a husband if married, or otherwise a male relative). Lydia Kompe (Interview 2006) adds:

...at that time we also noted the high rates in divorce and single female household. These are the things we wanted to change because most women were already working and could afford [to financially take care of the household and the family] ...

## Sexual violence against women in society

The domination of women in society is not only limited to the control of their economic activities or physical abuse, in the worst situations it includes sexual violence. Sexual violence against women in South Africa has been a common phenomenon, particularly during the apartheid period.<sup>117</sup> For a long period the state and society failed to regard acts of sexual violence as serious violation of human rights against women.

In 1988 soldiers raped Mpho Mokoena in the dormitories in her boarding school.<sup>118</sup> This was during the period of increased political protests against apartheid oppression and many students were involved in these protests. Four soldiers raided the girls' dormitory and Mokoena believes that the intention was to sexually assault the girls. While a group of girls managed to escape, she and two other girls were unfortunate and they were sexually assaulted.

... I remember one of them was called Romeo. He came in and demanded that I lock the whole dormitory and that no one was going anywhere. The plan was to rape everyone inside. You know, I was very argumentative and they threatened us with guns and then eventually this Romeo guy raped me at gunpoint. But you know, I was stubborn and felt that I could not keep quiet. I told them that 'whatever you are doing here, I am going to lay a charge'. They understood that they were on duty and what they were doing was wrong. And he asked me

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<sup>116</sup> Kompe is currently an activist in the Rural Women's Movement which she helped found in 1986 when she left the labour movement. She is also ANC member of parliament.

<sup>117</sup> South Africa is currently grappling with a problem of great magnitude in the high incidence of sexual violence against women and children. Due to pressure from women's rights groups, rape is considered a serious offence with minimum sentence of 15 years to life imprisonment. However, successful prosecution is still a major challenge, particularly in cases of child sexual abuse (See Vogelmann, 1990 and Van Zyl, 1991 for detailed discussion on sexual violence).

<sup>118</sup> The name of the respondent has been changed to protect her identity.

‘where are you going to lay a charge? I am the law myself and nobody will touch me.’ The others got hold of the two young girls and raped them. I was trying to fight, but it was of no help (Mpho Mokoena, Interview 2006).

According to Mokoena, the boarding master advised her not to start a case. He insisted that “those people were bad, even if I laid charges; nothing will be done with those soldiers” (Interview 2006). And indeed, as Romeo initially told Mokoena that he was the law, for a while the police department and his colleagues protected him against prosecution. Mokoena points out that:

The case took too long (the incident happened sometime in 1988, but the first court hearing took place in January 1989) before it went to court and in the process, these soldiers were intimidating me. During that period, I was requested not to go ahead with the case by some of the Boers he worked with. They were arguing that I was too young to handle this case and so on ... (Mpho Mokoena, Interview 2006).

The boarding master and Romeo’s colleagues seemed to have underestimated the extent of the violation of Mokoena’s human rights. Their social location in a context where sexual violence towards women was trivialized by both the state and the society at large made it impossible for them to view the issue differently. On the one hand there was the state, which prioritised political repression, failing to police criminal activities, let alone sexual violence against women within their communities. On the other hand, you had the liberation movement, which also prioritised the political struggle against apartheid oppression, however excluding such acts of violence against women in their definition of apartheid oppression.

Sexual violence against women in South Africa is one of those struggles in which women have engaged in various ways and at different levels to force the state, the liberation movement, as well as society as a whole, to recognise this as a serious violation of their human rights. These struggles have often been at an individual level whereby women have exhausted the legal justice system to insist on prosecution, with limited success: in other cases they have used collective action such as protest marches against such incidents.<sup>119</sup> Mpho Mokoena is one of those women who were fortunate to use the legal system, and was successful. Her success, however, can be attributed to the intervention of her maternal uncle who worked for a law firm. His knowledge of the legal system assisted in speeding up the case and the successful prosecution of the soldier who raped her.

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<sup>119</sup> In Port Alfred, women organised a community boycott against the police’s refusal to arrest the man accused of raping a woman in the community. Women called for a suspension of work and a boycott of local business, demanding police action against the accused (see Work In Progress, 1986 and Cherry, 2007).

In the case of the other two girls, who did not have legal intervention, to Mokoena's knowledge, there was never any prosecution.

The importance of the case to Mokoena was ensuring that other women were protected from this man. Individual acts of reporting the case of rape and following the legal judicial system may not be 'classically' defined as part of the process of activism since they do not involve the process of mobilisation, organisation or social protest. However, Mokoena's courage and defiance against silence forms part of her activism against remaining a victim of male abuse. By insisting on speaking out, she protested against the violation of her rights and sought justice. Mokoena played a role in protecting other women from such acts of violence by this particular individual. She argues, "You know, I had that thing that no matter what, I am going ahead, I was going to lay charges because if I did not, they would continue doing such things" (Interview 2006).

This experience is not only about opposing the state or police abuse of power, but also against male domination and abuse. By having 'that thing' which pushed her to lay a charge against the 'law' himself, Mokoena challenged the power relations at two different levels. Firstly, at the level of the state since her perpetrator was a government soldier and part of law enforcement. Secondly, her challenge was at the gender activism level, insisting on ensuring that the man is imprisoned and will never be in a position to use state power or resources to violate other women.<sup>120</sup>

## Gender relations and inequalities within the family

The interviews with women in this research further reflect on experiences of gender inequality within the family. While growing up, girls are often subjected to domestic chores in the family. The assumption within the family is that this is preparation for when they are married and will be expected to take care of their households and their husbands. Selina Tyikwe, who comes from a family of five - with four brothers, Tyikwe is the only girl in her family - reflects on these experiences within her family. She further highlights that these observations of unequal gender relations in her case were not limited to her family alone but also to other settings within her social environment:

At home you would feel that something was not right. It was as if I was different from them, things were done differently with me. I was expected to be home early and I was responsible for most of the household tasks. And they were older than me. So I could not understand how come that was the case. Those differences, the gender imbalances, you would see it at home, in the

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<sup>120</sup> According to Mokoena, the man was sentenced to eight years and was barred from ever holding a government post.

society and at school... And when I participated in the youth organisations and community organisations, that was still there. It was not different when I came to the unions. I have seen that a lot in the unions ... (Selina Tyikwe, Interview 2005).

As Tyikwe's story demonstrates, strict control was applied over her movements and times for coming back home. In some instances, this applied even to women who were already grown up and working. Some women who were still residing with their families were often subjected to control and monitoring of their movements. In the interviews women revealed complaints from their fathers when they started being active in the trade union movement (Thembi Nabe, 2004; Maggie Magubane, 2004; Thembi Motlhamme, 2005). The complaints centred mainly on their long periods of absence from home and coming home late from union meetings. Maggie Magubane explains the complaints from her father below:

That I was never at home on weekends, that I come home late during the week. He did not understand what was happening ... (Question: Did that have anything to do with you being a woman?) Answer: Yes there was that conflict but I used to force my way, I was stubborn. I told myself that I was going to continue with my activism (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

Further examples of sexist attitudes within the family are highlighted in discussions about education. The research shows that some women grew up in households with fathers who believed that education was not necessary for girls. According to Nomvula Rain Chiya (Interview 2004) "my father is Baca... He was very traditional. And he believed that a girl child should not be educated to the highest level..." Educating girls was perceived as a waste of resources since it was often assumed that they would get married and their husbands will provide for them. The other issue with educating girls was the perception that it was an empty 'investment' because once they get married they will belong to the husband's family and their income (if they are educated and have good jobs) will belong to that family. Based on these perceptions, Maud Khumalo believes that:

...If my father had his way, we would have gone to school only until standard 2 [grade 4]. For him going to school was mainly so that one could be literate and be able to read letters from her husband when she's married to a migrant worker (Maud Khumalo, Interview 2005).

In some cases where mothers had insisted on sending their daughters to school, some fathers were happy to be 'proven right' that girls did not belong in school. This was the case for Maud Khumalo who became pregnant in her teens. She points out that "...when I became pregnant", my father said "look what would

have happened to my money if I had invested in her education” (Maud Khumalo, Interview 2005). Rain Chiya (Interview 2004) also received a similar reaction from her father when she was expelled from boarding school after leaving school premises to attend a political meeting without permission. She argues that her father “failed to intervene” on her behalf because he did not believe in the importance of keeping her in school. When he was called to come pick her up, “he told me that in any case he was not happy educating a girl child because he would have been doing it for other people” (Interview 2004).

This research indicates that parents’ differences over the education of girls provided examples of women challenging male authority within the family setting. Some mothers opposed their husbands’ patriarchal views regarding the education of their daughters. They engaged in various economic activities to raise funds to send their girl children to school. Maggie Magubane states that, “my mother struggled educating us with the money she would get from doing laundry” (Interview 2004). In the same vein, Maud Khumalo asserts that:

...My mother came from a family that had gone to school. Although she never had the opportunity to go to school since she was the eldest and had to take care of those who came after her, her younger siblings had gone to school. So she always insisted that she wanted her children to be educated like her sisters. So she would knit and sew clothes and we helped her to sell those things to raise money for our education. And she would come to Johannesburg to sell her things (Maud Khumalo, Interview 2004).

As already argued, these differences within the family are important in the observations of these women. The measures taken by their mothers in raising money for their daughters’ education challenged the gender role stereotype whereby the father is often perceived as the sole provider for the family. In addition, it also challenged the notion that the father is the main authority in the family’s decisions. Such observations are important in shaping the daughters’ views on gender relations and challenging the societal norms and values that prescribe that women be submissive to men.

## Observations of women as family providers

Although exposed to a sexist society that defined roles on the basis of gender, their everyday observations contradicted these stereotypes. All the women interviewed in this research come from working-class backgrounds, where their mothers participated in wage labour, mostly as domestic workers and factory workers. Although some classified their mothers as ‘housewives’ and therefore not engaged in wage labour, further inquiry indicated that their mothers did

engage in various forms of economic activity such as washing laundry in white neighbourhoods or sewing and knitting and selling the products. Observations within these women's varying social contexts influenced their perspectives or views on different roles for women within society.

I have never believed that a woman's role is at home or that women are only suitable for domestic chores. ... It is because my mother struggled too, she brought us up under very difficult circumstances. My father was a contract worker and so was never at home all the time. He would come home once a month or so (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

Seeing women in different roles in the community contradicted the gender role stereotypes that dominated society. Observations of significant women in their lives taking care of the household, working in a full time job and at the same time engaging in community struggles challenged gender stereotypes about the role of women outside the domestic sphere.

Since our father passed away, my mother played both roles of mother and father. She did everything for us, sending us to school and providing for us. At the same time she was an activist herself, she used to work for the South African Council of Churches (SACC). She would work for the community; she would be woken up very late at night to assist people to deliver (give birth), she used to work in local clinic and people knew her very well. Those are the things that influenced my upbringing. Observing my mother raising the four of us and managing well without a man, running the household successfully, influenced me. That made me aware that women could be independent, they could manage their households efficiently without the assistance of men (Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004).

However, not all women grew up in families where their mothers had full-time jobs or were single parents. In some cases women had mothers who were 'housewives' and were reliant on fathers for household income. In some families, these caused an unequal and abusive relationship. For Louisa Modikwe, this is an experience that influenced her need to have her own income and not be dependant on anyone.

Where I come from, I grew up struggling; I do not want to see my children suffering the way I did. Now if I was going to adopt my mother's style of being a housewife it would have meant that my children would also suffer because I would not have a big say. Your own wages helps you in the house (gives you a big say). If a man comes home and tells you that he does not have money, what are you going to do? You won't have much to say but your children will suffer (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

## Abusive and oppressive relationships with men

For some of the women interviewed in this research, personal and romantic relationships with men were also important in raising their gender awareness. In most cases, these relationships are based on unequal power relations whereby the man is often the one who makes decisions in the relationship. In some situations these decisions included whether the woman could join the labour market, be active in the trade union and the type of work or industry in which they could engage. For Joyce Pekani, her ex-husband forbade her to work.

I got married and then moved to Durban in 1983. At the time I had a baby girl. But the marriage did not last long. We had differences with my husband as he was expecting me to stay at home and take care of the baby. He did not want me to be in the labour market ... Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004).

For some women already in the workplace, their husbands made decisions for them about working late night shifts. According to Modise "... when the company wanted to introduce the night shift for all workers, including women...I put in my notice of resignation because my husband would not allow me to work nightshift" (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

In the interview with Lydia Kompe she discussed at length her first husband and the control that he had over her economic activities. As mentioned earlier, Kompe could not complete her high school education. However, she had the junior certificate (grade ten), which qualified her to train as an assistant nurse.

So in 1954 I went to Potgietersrus hospital to train as a nurse. But I could not finish one year because I was married and my husband did not like the profession I had chosen. In 1955 we came to Johannesburg. He joined the railway. In 1956 I had a baby and in 1958 I had the second one and we got married ... (I was still unemployed), he still refused me to train as a nurse ... He would say you could do any other work but not nursing. And there was no other work that could pay me well. If I was going to do teaching I needed money and he did not have money and neither did my parents (Lydia Kompe, 2005).

In the history of the South African labour movement Kompe is widely known as an outspoken woman so I was astonished by this information. I therefore asked whether she never challenged her husband at this point. She responded thus:

No, not at that time. In fact during that period marriage came first before your profession. You just felt that if you lose that man you will not get married, so you would put marriage before your profession. And with the rural background you did not have much strength to challenge a

man ... So I obeyed everything he said. We got married in 1958 and I became a housewife and looked after the children (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

Kompe's views on marriage were largely influenced by the upbringing of girls in the South African society at the time. Girls were brought up to be respectful and obedient, especially to their husbands or any male authority. In some cases, girls went through a ceremony in which they are initiated into womanhood and the rules about being a good woman are laid out. Joyce Pekani elaborated on this initiation ceremony in the following:

... There is a cultural thing that is done for girls, called intonjane (an initiation ceremony whereby a girl is initiated into womanhood). You would be taught about womanhood, how you are supposed to carry yourself as a woman. You are told that you should respect men, irrespective of age, that a man is man. At the time I felt proud that I went through that process. But as an adult I began questioning those things, whether that made sense, that I should respect all men, whether young or old, that I must regard them as superior and always listen and not argue (Interview 2004).

Indeed as Pekani grew up, became mature and exposed to different realities in life, this 'cultural thing' or influences were often questioned: for instance, during her short marriage in 1983 she started questioning her upbringing. She had a husband who refused to let her work or even leave the house without permission or being accompanied by him. Reflecting on this experience, Pekani admits in retrospect, "I only realised later that I was resisting" (Interview 2004).

Thembi Nabe (Interview 2004) initially gave in to her husband's controlling behaviour. She resigned from being the general secretary of the Metal Workers' Union in 1984 because of the conflict she had at home with her husband about her union activities. Even so, she argues that:

...As time goes on you reach a point where you feel that it is too much, you cannot take it. You know, you try and submit as they say you should submit to your husband. But then you realise that you can only do things that he wants and nothing that you want. You then develop that attitude that you don't want to be controlled. And once you start challenging him he realises that he does not stand a chance anymore. *You realise that if that is what our mothers had to put up with, you have a life to live (added emphasis)*. Then he realised that if he persists with his attitude, we are going to have problems in our marriage. And with that, things changed (Thembi Nabe, Interview 2004).

Nabe's comments above illustrate her initial acceptance of society's expectations of her regarding her relationship with her husband. It also shows her processes of developing assertiveness and challenging the common assumptions about male control and domination over her.

In the situation of Lydia Kompe, her long experience of being dominated by her husband, sacrificing an opportunity of having a nursing career and the divorce by her husband "worked" on her. These experiences were influential in her awareness of gender inequalities and oppression in women's relations with men. She reflects:

I think those are the things that worked on me all the time. When I began looking at my background I realised that I couldn't allow things to go on like that... That was after we divorced in 1973. He divorced me... He got married to a nurse. I got very angry with him, I'm still angry with him because I feel that I could have gone far with my education. I was bright enough; it was just unfortunate that my parents could not afford to send me to school. After our divorce in 1973 I felt that I had had enough (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

Kompe's relationship with her husband was not limited to controlling her employment, but it was physically abusive as well. When asked about taking up union leadership in the workplace, in an industry (the metal sector) dominated by men, Lydia Kompe related her experience of observing first her mother being abused by her father while no one was willing to intervene to stop the abuse. "I was always angry with my father for being abusive to my mother". The second observation was her direct experience of physical violence.<sup>121</sup>

I don't know, many things influenced me at that time. You know...the arrogance of my husband, the violence I suffered from my husband, beating me all the time for no apparent reason, actually made me to become... When I was still growing up, I always told myself that I would never tolerate an abusive man. But I was unfortunate that my husband was also abusive towards me. He was very jealous and controlling. He always had this fear that if I got a job I would be better than him. He could see that I was very intelligent. And he therefore never allowed me to have a job (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2006).

In the discussion above, Kompe describes her own processes of gender consciousness. Instead of focusing on the workplace as the question I asked her prescribed, she presents her own understanding of how she became gender conscious. She emphasizes that her gender consciousness was formed prior to her

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<sup>121</sup> This was an unexpected response to the question I asked. Since I was focusing on the workplace, I was expecting a discussion of the power dynamics between women and men there. This illustrates the importance of allowing research informants to be in control of how they present their understanding of their own life experiences.

joining the workforce. According to Kompe, when she entered the labour market and joined the labour movement, she was already "...a bit smart (kebe kele clever - yana) and I was already mature. I already had three grown up children" (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2006). From her experiences in the household, she "had enough" of male domination, and felt brave enough to challenge any male authority - even white male supervisors in the workplace.

Like Kompe, Louisa Modikwe grew up with an abusive father. "He used to be a heavy drinker and when he was drunk he would cause problems in the house. And that behaviour made me have less respect for male figures" (Interview 2005). It was from these observations that Modikwe vowed never to allow anyone to control her or force her into anything. This came out of the discussion about her relationship with the father of her three children and the strong position she has taken against his and his family's attempts to control her union activities (Interview 2005). She further argues:

...I told myself that I would never live the kind of life that my mother had ... I believe that you only live once and you have to live your life to the fullest because you will never be given a second chance to come back to earth once you've passed on (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

In her autobiography, Mashinini discusses her first marriage and the abuse she suffered from her first husband. In a recent interview with the researcher, though not comfortable discussing the issue she notes that "... our marriages had a lot of abuse and that was also an eye opener... to see how long am I going to remain a victim? It is fighting against being a victim (Mashinini, Interview 2005). Mashinini went on to argue against the societal culture, which encouraged women to "stick it out" in marriages, regardless of the extent of abuse, and treated divorced women with contempt:

...But it is how we are brought up. It is like you are a failure ... I don't know if men feel... like we do... it seems as though certain things are for men and not for women. But if you are a woman who wants to stand up for your rights, don't stick it out my child (referring to me, the researcher), get out ... find your own way of making yourself comfortable (Emma Mashinini, Interview 2005).

The differences between Kompe and Modikwe in asserting themselves in male relationships can be largely explained by looking at the differences in their social location and the opportunity structure in each of their location. Although growing up in the same society with the same background, theirs are two different periods. While Kompe and Mashinini are of the older generation that grew up in a context that held strong beliefs about marriage, Modikwe is of the recent

generation. Born in 1967, she grew up in a social context where ideas about marriage and family were already changing. By the time she was an adult and started working in the 1990s households headed by a single female had become widely accepted in her social surroundings. These changes in society are influential in how she handles gender relations.

## Conclusion

Experiences of racial and gender discrimination are simultaneous processes for African women. However, racism and apartheid oppression receive more focus, as they are the dominant frame mobilisation articulated by the political leadership. As shown in chapter two, frame alignment is often influenced by the dominant culture and the political context. The dominant political discourse of race articulated by opponents of the apartheid regime influences the language and definition of oppression for Africans.

Since gender discrimination and patriarchal relations within society are regarded as the norm within society, these kinds of oppressions are excluded from the public political discourses. Gender oppression is separated from the broader political discourse and frame mobilisation. However, this does not necessarily mean that women are oblivious to gender discrimination or violation of gender rights within their social setting. As some of the examples in the chapter illustrate, women, through various means at individual levels, have challenged patriarchal domination or gender discrimination. These early experiences of gender oppression and gender discrimination are central in women's consciousness of gender inequalities within their social setting. Gender consciousness gained from these early experiences is therefore critical for women's collective solidarity and mobilisation on collective action against gender inequality.



## Women in the forefront of workers' struggles

### Introduction

Trade union mobilisation and the struggles for workers' rights in the workplace are generally regarded in masculine terms, a power struggle between male workers and their male employers. Trade union organisation and fighting for workers' interests are usually treated as a male domain. Women are often assumed to be tied-up with their domestic responsibilities and have no time to dedicate to trade union politics, even if they are part of the workforce. Such assumptions have resulted in the exclusion, for the most part, of women in the history of the labour movement. The history of the labour movement in South Africa demonstrates the significant contributions of male figures in the building of trade unions and struggles for workers' rights. Although women were already a significant part of the workforce during this period of trade union mobilisation, their involvement during this important moment in the history of South Africa is ignored.

This chapter explores the role of African women in the building of the trade union movement. I demonstrate that women played leading roles in organising their fellow workers in their places of work. I suggest further that in the same way that wages and working conditions are often regarded as central to male workers' motivation for trade union mobilisation, women had similar motivations. However, for African women who suffer discrimination on the basis of their race and gender, their motivations had a different dynamic. Racism,

sexism and gender discrimination in the workplace are central to the mobilisation of working African women.

## Women's experiences of the workplace

Many of the women interviewed in this research come from working-class backgrounds. Unable to complete their high school education (particularly the two earlier generations), they had few or no skills and therefore limited employment opportunities. Adding to their predicament was the apartheid government's racist and sexist policies that limited employment opportunities for African women. Many of them, as the discussion below will demonstrate, were employed mostly in female dominated industries and occupations. These included the textile industry, commercial and catering sector, but some were employed in male dominated areas like the chemical and metal sector, and a few in the transport industry.

South African workplaces have been described as "apartheid workplace regimes"<sup>122</sup> wherein the whites were the bosses and made rules that were absolute. Sixty-three year old Maggie Magubane, who is currently a member of parliament for the ruling ANC political party, started working at Western biscuits factory in Springs, in the East Rand, in 1966. She recalls her experiences at the time:

Yoo (Exclamation) it was bad, it was bad! In so much that every time we saw a white person you must work hard, *very hard* (she gave this strong emphasis), pretend that you are working hard because the white man was there looking at you as a supervisor or management. We used to work very hard, made a lot of production, we were working over-time and underpaid ...We worked long hours, working over the weekends, December used to be the busiest month and still we were underpaid (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

Faith Modise was born in the late 1940s (fifty-seven years old) and like many women of her generation, she comes from a working-class background where her mother was the breadwinner. She was forced to leave school in 1970 when only doing standard six (grade eight). In 1971 she found a job at Gregory Mills (a textile factory) where she was still employed when I interviewed her. Prior to her working, her mother who was also a factory worker at a garment factory, often told her stories about "the working place and the bad treatment they used to get from employers" (Faith Modise, Interview 2004). Like her mother, Modise had her own experiences of the "bad" conditions when she started. She recalls that:

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<sup>122</sup> See Von Holdt, 2001.

... The conditions here at work were bad; there was a lot of apartheid. We also had to get permission to use the toilet. And you were not supposed to take long in the toilet. We had white male supervisors who would come and drag you out of the toilet. He would knock at the door and demand that you come out (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

The lack of respect for African women by their male supervisors was common in many workplaces. Within the apartheid legal system, African women had no legal status since they were usually regarded as minors. Unlike their male counterparts, women were often subjected to strict forms of control and monitoring (Lorna Motsoahae, Interview 2004).

The analysis of workers' struggles over wages and working conditions often has a male bias, as already mentioned in chapter three. The impression made is that wages and working conditions largely concern male workers, particularly with their assumed role as family breadwinners. Contrary to this picture, interviews with most of the women in this research indicate that like many of their male counterparts, the issue of wages and working conditions is important in women's mobilisation into workers' campaigns. Women like Elizabeth Thabethe, who at the time of the interview was a member of parliament for the ruling ANC,<sup>123</sup> highlighted their frustration with the irregular conditions under which they worked. She argues that "we did not have fixed working conditions, like for instance our leave was not fixed; sometimes the firm would be closed for one week, other times two weeks" (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). Unilateral decisions were often made about working conditions or salaries without consulting or informing the workers. Agreeing with Thabethe's contention, Veronica Mesatywa, who is currently an organiser at SATAWU, argues thus:

The salary that was paid to us was decided by management, we never had a set fee that this is our minimum wages for the month. Management would just make a decision that this week we will be paid such an amount and next time it would be a different amount. We did not have benefits (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

For some women, their experiences in the workplace, of working hard and long hours for low wages helped them realise the exploitation of their parents and a better understanding of their economic hardships when they were growing up. Elizabeth Thabethe recalled her astonishment at her salary and the difficulties she faced in trying to make ends meet with her meagre wages. She remarked that:

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<sup>123</sup> In June 2005, in a government reshuffle, she was appointed as deputy minister of trade and industry.

The money was very low; it was probably R13 per week. I would really wonder about the salary and I asked my father about it. Was this the amount of money that everybody was earning? My father said 'yes' and even suggested that I was better off because others were earning around R5 per week ... As a child I could not understand that they were earning little money because of the system of exploitation. It began to make sense and I questioned how they managed for the whole family with such little money. The money was so little that we could not even budget with that (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Although Africans usually earned low wages, African women were the lowest paid amongst factory workers (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004 and Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005). Fifty-year-old Gertrude Mabiletsa has worked at a paper and printing company (Bellside) since 1982. She underlined the gender differences that existed at her company in the 1980s in terms of pay. She notes that:

...When we started the job, men were paid more than us, they were paid seventy-four Rands (R74) while we were earning thirty-four Rands (R34). But we were performing similar tasks... (Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005).

The discrimination between women and men in wages was not necessarily based on differences in the job categories or their performance in the workplace. Reflecting on the issue, Maggie Magubane put on record that:

Women used to work more perfectly compared to men... And even when it came to production women used to produce more than men. They used to stick to their work, men would go out very often, like going out for a smoke and so on. So women used to do most of the work but they were still underpaid... (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

In the same light in which the apartheid state often regarded African women as dependent on a male, employers held the view that women were not heads of households and therefore they did not have financial obligations in their families. Veronica Mesatywa, who originally hails from the Eastern Cape, got her first job in 1975 at a shoe factory in Pietermaritzburg in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Mesatywa's first awareness of the gender inequalities in the pay between women and men made her mobilise other women to go on an illegal strike. This resulted in her dismissal from the company. Her views on the gender differences in pay are that:

Men were treated as seniors and we were minors... They were paid more because it was believed that they were breadwinners and we women were working for luxury. But that was not true because women are more responsible for their families (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

The differences in wages and occupations were also noticeable amongst women of different racial groupings. White women, as members of the dominant ruling class, were at the top of the hierarchy, while all other groups, including Indians and coloureds, followed behind. In this hierarchy, African women were at the bottom. Veronica Mesatywa again raised her concern over the different treatment of women of different racial groupings. She remarks that:

... The salaries were paid according to race, so White women, Indian and Coloured earned differently to us African women ... we were all women but we were coming from different races ... African women were the worst off (Veronica Mesatywa, interview 2004).

For many women workers during the apartheid period, the workplace was characterised by a lot of injustices and disrespect towards African workers. Most of them witnessed incidents of male workers being physically assaulted by male supervisors in the workplace. Sibongile Masangwane (when I interviewed her she was self-employed and also involved in the Gauteng Self-employed Women's Union) who started working for a transport company (truck industry) in 1983, "witnessed the injustices that were being committed against African male workers." Prior to working in this company, Masangwane had part-time jobs that lasted only "three to four months" because "at that time I had serious problems with white people... I had an attitude towards white people and therefore could not last in my jobs." She points out that:

... Joining the workplace and experiencing white domination, seeing a white man whipping African men; that used to shock and hurt me. That used to hurt me so much and I would wonder, how or what does this man say to his wife and children about being chased by another man at work? My heart used to be very sore. I could not believe it. I became angry, wondering how these men might have felt (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2004).

In the first instance, Masangwane's concern with the physical assault of 'African men' in the workplace by the 'white man' indicates her feelings of racial identity with the abused men. It also points to the indignity with which Africans were treated in the workplace. In the second instance however, it also reflects her gendered views about manhood and the sense of violation of African manhood by the white man. Masangwane's observation and emphasis on racial identity

highlight the boundaries she creates, wherein the 'white man' is perceived as the 'other' that is not within her boundaries.

Joyce Pekani, who at the time of the interview was the second deputy president of CCEPPWAWU, joined a chemical sector company in 1986. She stresses similar humiliating experiences to which African workers were often subjected. She recounts "...there was so much unfair labour practice. I saw people being insulted, being shouted at, and being treated like small kids..." (Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004). She admits that the reasons that made her search for information about organizing a trade union in her workplace were largely influenced by the anger she felt when she observed her fellow workers:

Being made to pick up papers outside in the workplace (as punishment for arriving late at work), wash the bosses' cars, and sometimes the supervisors would force female workers to go to their houses to do domestic work for them" (Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004).<sup>124</sup>

Gertrude Mabiletsa, who works in the paper and printing industry corroborated Pekani's story. Her account demonstrates the power that the white supervisors had over African women workers. She highlights the extremes in which Africans were "really harassed by white people."

... A person was like a donkey. At times before you go to lunch you had to wash a white person's feet, carry their basket and so on. If you refuse to follow instructions from a white person you could loose your job. Sometimes you would come in early in the morning and around 9am you'd be taken out the backdoor to go to your supervisor's house to clean and do laundry in their houses without the firm owner's knowledge (Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005).

These are examples of the sort of thing that mobilised most of the women interviewed into trade unions. The majority of them joined the workforce in the early years before trade unions were established or properly recognised in the workplace. Most of the accounts demonstrate numerous instances of abuse of African workers' rights during this period.

## Issues of maternity leave under apartheid

As already emphasised, gender discrimination in the workplace was a central element in the apartheid system. The apartheid workplace laws made no provision for maternity leave for women workers. "At that time we had no maternity agreements... It was up to management's discretion whether you

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<sup>124</sup> Von Holdt (2001:75) refers to such instances as "workplace practices that constituted blacks as the servants of whites."

would be allowed to come back or not.” (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004). This experience took fifty-two year old Rain Chiya by surprise in her first job in 1973, as she was still fresh from high school.

I first worked at the telephone manufacturing company. That must have been in 1973 I think. Then I became pregnant and the personnel officer called me to his office and said I was dismissed. Then I did not understand and I asked how come? When you start working at the company nobody takes time to explain the conditions of employment. I was told that it was because I got pregnant. I was not given a warning or anything. That made me very angry and bitter... (Nomvula Rain Chiya, Interview 2004).

Discussions with the women in this research suggest that African women were often treated differently from other racial groupings when it came to maternity leave. Most had to endure the painful experience of hiding their pregnancies at work to protect their jobs. Patricia Khumalo (fifty-one years old) is the eldest of eleven siblings.<sup>125</sup> When she completed her high school education in 1974, she was “lucky” to find a job through a neighbour at the Checkers Supermarket, one of the largest retail chain stores in South Africa. In 1980 she became pregnant with her first child. Although she was already married at the time, she was still responsible for helping her mother (her father died when she was only 15 years old) with her younger siblings. Because of the financial responsibilities she had during her first pregnancy, Khumalo was faced with the fear of losing her job. For six months she “kept quiet because being pregnant at that time was not part of the working contract I had with my employers” (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004). But after six months it was difficult and dangerous<sup>126</sup> to continue concealing her pregnancy, and she had to plead with her supervisor not to dismiss her and to retain her job after giving birth. She was told that:

I gave you the job, I employed you and you never told me that at some stage you would fall pregnant, so what do you expect me to do? The choice is yours and you choose to be pregnant. We will see after you have given birth if you can still have your job back” (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

Interviews in this research suggest that the workplace was perceived in male worker terms, whereby employees are expected to be always available for work without any break in service. Women in the workplace were therefore also

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<sup>125</sup> When I interviewed her she worked for the Sexual Harassment Programme, which was initiated by COSATU.

<sup>126</sup> She informed me that she used to wear tight underwear (corset) to tuck-in her tummy during the first months of her pregnancy. However, as she continued with her pregnancy “it felt so uncomfortable as if it would come out through the mouth” (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

expected to fit into the 'male worker model.' Management gave them the 'choice,' "if you want to make babies, you should stay at home and you can make as many babies as you would like. But as long as you are here you need to be productive" (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

Although it was never recognised as an essential, women of other racial groupings received special treatment with regards to maternity leave.<sup>127</sup> According Mesatywa, "the white women, Indian women and coloured women were given time off." She notes that:

... They had a one-month privilege, but it was not paid. But at least they were guaranteed their jobs back. But they were still demoted; they would not occupy the same position as they used to before going on maternity leave. That was one area I used to observe. Although they had that privilege, they were re-employed as casuals (Interview 2004).

As already illustrated in chapter three, maternity leave was a very contentious issue for many women workers, and many women attribute their union participation to this issue. For many of the women interviewed, the experiences of gender discrimination in the workplace were important for their identity as a gender group. Their awareness of the common experiences at work, experiences they did not share with men, was useful in the framing and articulation of issues of gender inequality and sexism in the workplace, and later within the union movement, as it will be illustrated in this research.

## Sexual harassment in the workplace

Another area in which the labour laws at the time failed to protect women was sexual harassment in the workplace. Commenting on this issue, Joyce Pekani recounts "...those times sexual harassment was very common. It was very difficult for women to get jobs without having to sleep with one of the supervisors or the hiring officer" (Interview 2004). Adding to the discussion on sexual harassment, Masangwane asserts that sexual harassment of women in the workplace "has always been there but we did not talk much about it then." Forty-eight-year old Thembi Masondo, who is currently a shop steward at Shoprite Checkers, described an incident she experienced in 1988 at the same company:

When I came back here (she moved from Kwa-Zulu Natal to Johannesburg after getting married) I became an administrator, working with a coloured manager. Then I realised the importance of

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<sup>127</sup> Since little research has been done on women in these particular racial categories, there is not much information available on their experiences in the workplace during this period, and especially on this issue of maternity leave.

the union. That man wanted to sleep with every African woman, exploiting them. He used to call me into his office and he would close the curtain blinds so that no one could see inside and then he would press against me, touch me and try to force himself on me (Thembi Masondo, Interview 2004).

According to the women interviewed in this research, some men who were in senior positions to African women in the workplace often abused their powers by forcing women to have sex with them or threatening to terminate their employment. In most situations, women either had to go along with the harassment to secure employment and ensure that they remain employed, or face the risk of remaining unemployed or losing their jobs if they failed to comply. Although some women complied out of fear of losing their jobs, some became "...fed up by the harassment. I did not even have the fear of being dismissed..." (Thembi Masondo, Interview 2004). Masondo was fortunate in her instance, since trade unions were already established and her union SACCAWU was one of the militant trade unions at the time. After raising the issue with the union, which took up the issue with management, the supervisor was dismissed.

## Experiences of the workplace in the post-apartheid era

The experiences of women in the workplace in the post apartheid era have similarities to those of the earlier generations. Like their older counterparts, the generation currently in the factory workplace is confronted with management who often abuse their powers. However, the difference is that it is within a democratic context with recognised trade union rights and workers' rights; this new democratic context places limitations on the extent of abuse of powers and it has also empowered many of the women currently in the workplace.

As in the apartheid workplace context, management still exercises a lot of authority and control over African workers, particularly women. The issue of controlling women's access to the toilet is also highlighted in the workplace of the 1990s. For management, their concern is largely meeting production deadlines and ensuring that employees 'work hard.' Thirty-six year old Louisa Modikwe (she is currently an organiser with SACTWU) who began working at a textile factory in Rosslyn, in Pretoria in 1995, illustrates this point in the discussion below. According to Modikwe:

... Sometimes the employer would say 'you are wasting my time; you go to the toilet too many times. And now you'll only go to the toilets at lunch time.' *Now nature calls what must you do?* What I did one morning was I collected small rubbish bins and emptied them and then filled them with water that has been dipped with tea bags and put some toilet paper. When the manager

came in he asked what was going on. And I said 'no we are not going to waste your production time by going to the toilets. That is urine whoever wants to relieve themselves they can use that.' This was out of anger. I have to go the toilet, I am an adult. And I am keeping their production targets. Now what is it that they want from me if they are going to tell me that I should not go to the toilet? (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

Unlike the earlier generation interviewed in this research who joined the workforce during the period of apartheid oppression without the protection of workers' rights, Modikwe was well aware of her rights in the workplace and that she could not be dismissed without a sound reason or a warning. The constitution of the country, which tabled the rights of all citizens in the country, had already been drafted; and the government had already introduced several legislative measures, including the new Labour Relations Act, which guaranteed the rights of all workers. It was in this context that Modikwe tested the limits of her new rights in a democratic South Africa. When I probed further into her extreme action to challenge her supervisor's decisions her response was "I am one of the people who thought that whatever I was doing [in the workplace] I had rights" (Interview 2005).

Certainly, the post-apartheid generation workforce was not fearful of challenging what they perceived as unfair management practices. They were very conscious of racial discrimination and their rights in the workplace. They "have read so many books about such things [racism] and have seen movies like *Sarafina*" (Hilda Matjee, Interview 2004). Although similar to their counterparts in the early 1960s and 1970s in their awareness of racism and injustices against African people by white people, these young activists were also aware of the new opportunities within their democratised context. Hilda Matjee who is the chairperson of the Gauteng council of shop stewards for SATAWU, started working for one of the airline companies in 1997. She complained about the dominance of "Boers" in the cargo section where she first worked in the company.

... They were too racist ... They have that attitude that you are black and you said you wanted a job, and thus you don't have rights. And I think that is when maybe I took a decision and said that this is my position. I told myself that I was not going to say that 'oh it was for the first time so maybe it is okay'... no that's not the way to go (Hilda Matjee, Interview 2004).

Not only did Matjee's generation have the advantage of democracy and legislation, which guaranteed workers' rights, but they also had access and the right to information; and were not afraid to ask questions, which sets them apart

from the generation that joined the workforce during the apartheid period. Explaining her assertive behaviour, she notes that:

I know that is not how we were taught at school, but you get clues. And even when you are still new in the workplace, you want to know why are certain things happening or done in a particular way. So you make inquiries and ask for information (Hilda Matjee, Interview 2004).

In our discussion about workplace experiences, Gertude Mabiletsa, who has been in the workplace during both periods, the apartheid and the current post-apartheid era, suggested that there has not been much change in workplace relations. According to her, the changes are cosmetic. She argues that:

...Nothing much has changed. Ukushintsha kushu ukuthi kufana nesithombe esingaphandle (change is like a picture that is hung outside for the public view), to say, yes things have changed. But when you come inside the workplace, things are still pretty much the same (Interview 2005).

Mabiletsa who works for a small printing company believes that “...these legislations are more effective in those big multinational companies. There are big problems in these small firms owned by individuals. These people do not follow any regulations” (Interview 2005). She notes that although the legislation protects workers, employers still remind them ‘who is the boss’:

...At least now people cannot be just dismissed for no good reason. But you are still told that ‘this is my firm, and not Mbeki’s (the current South African President) or Vavi’s (the current COSATU general secretary). If I want to dismiss you I will (Interview 2005).

Mabiletsa also mentioned the challenges still faced in terms of equal wages or occupations between different gender groups as well as the different racial groupings. She points to the differences between women and men in terms of job mobility within her firm. While women were often kept in low paid jobs and rotated in different tasks with the same salary, men are often promoted into well paid jobs after a shorter period (Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005). Maternity leave is still another challenge that her employer often avoids by employing younger women as temporary/casual workers.<sup>128</sup> “In fact our employer does not like people who become pregnant. He says there is no need for people getting pregnant and having babies” (Interview 2005).

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<sup>128</sup> Under the current Basic Conditions of Employment Act, women are entitled to four months maternity leave. The employer has no obligation to pay wages during this period (but women can claim money from the Unemployment Insurance Fund), but unlike the apartheid period women have legal recourse if dismissed on this basis.

## Trade union mobilisation in the early 1970s

The early 1970s were characterised by workers' strikes, demanding better wages and recognition of trade union rights for African workers. As already mentioned, these strikes spread to most parts of the country, especially urban areas like Gauteng. The strikes had an influence on many workers; including women who were the lowest paid and, as already noted, were often subjected to various forms of discrimination. I have already highlighted the bias in the scholarly analysis of these strikes, pointing out that the experiences of women are hardly considered. This research therefore sheds light on women's experiences and perceptions of this period.

According to Modise, who still works in a textile factory, the 1970s workers' strikes raised awareness of trade unions in her workplace. Influenced by the developments in the country, two women workers in her factory approached other workers about the low wages they were earning and the unilateral decisions management often made over their increases (Interview 2004). The following morning all the workers congregated outside and "...that was our first strike in the company..." It was also the first time that she learned they already had a union in their workplace to which management referred them when they complained about their wages and the "sixty cents increase every year" (Faith Modise, Interview 2004). Complaining about this union, Modise argues that:

The union never came to the company to negotiate on our behalf and they never consulted with the workers... They never came to us to inform us about our rights or anything like that. We had a closed shop agreement and that meant automatically you become a member by working in the factory (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

As indicated earlier, the strikes in the early 1970s prompted many employers to introduce liaison committees and 'sweetheart unions' (those which collaborated with management against the workers) with the objective of suppressing trade union organisation in their place of work. The union to which Modise refers (Garment Workers' Union), was perceived to be a 'sweetheart union' that largely ensured that workers were disciplined and followed the orders of management.

Unlike Modise, fifty-seven year old Lorna Motsoahae (she currently works for an NGO called Malibongwe that is involved in various projects with under-privileged communities), who worked at another textile factory in Randfontein in the west of Johannesburg in the 1970s, was aware of the union in her workplace. Referring to the union, she remarks, "the union that we had was useless. They were telling us about funeral schemes, we are not looking forward to dying. We were not interested and we were still young" (Lorna Motsoahae, Interview 2004).

Motsoahae's workplace also had management liaison committees which she also felt were "useless and toothless" because management used these structures as a way of maintaining control over the workers. After being appointed by her colleagues to be part of the committee, Motsoahae attended one meeting where she noticed that shop stewards in this committee:

...were not raising the issues that affected workers on the floor, instead management would just inform the shop stewards who was not doing their job well and so on. But there was never anything coming from the shop stewards to raise the problems of the workers... (Lorna Motsoahae, Interview 2004).

The events within the country during this period were crucial in raising these women workers' consciousness about trade unions and workers' rights. The union organisers were going around workplaces, spreading information about trade unions and also recruiting workers. Patricia Khumalo, who at the time was working at a retail store, met Emma Mashinini in 1974 when she had gone out for lunch. Khumalo recalls that:

She [Mashinini] was organising workers and during that time I was so scared. She was telling me about unions and asking me about the working conditions ... So she explained to me that there is a union and I felt at that time that 'agh no Emma wants to get me fired from my job, she's telling me about these things.' And I was thinking that 'me I was coming from a poor background so I did not want to have anything to do with these things'. And she told me about the subscription costs (which was 25 cents) and how unions work. But I got interested and curious to know about the meetings. I attended the meetings but kept a low profile so that no one from my workplace would find out about it. ... at first it was very difficult for me to conceptualise the idea of a union in the workplace and what benefits were there for me as a worker. Over and above that I was very concerned about my job security. She was very upfront that once I become a union member, there's a likely possibility that I will be victimised. So I had to weigh my choices, to be or not to be. But in the end I am glad that she was able to convince me (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

Trade union membership carried high risks for many workers, especially during the early period of trade union mobilisation. Fear of dismissal was a primary concern for most of these women, particularly since many were breadwinners: even in families that had a double income, African workers' wages were low. However, the political context during the late 1970s and 1980s, with high profile political protests at various levels of society played a major role in developing the political awareness of women like Patricia Khumalo. Her younger brother was involved in student politics in the 1970s. He was one of the many students

arrested during the 1976 protests in black townships. According to Khumalo, her brother influenced her political consciousness, making her understand the interconnection between her experiences in the workplace and the apartheid system. Khumalo further notes that:

He is the one who was actually encouraging me to participate in the union... At that time we were paid very low wages ... My brother was telling me how important it was to belong to a collective structure, that we must promote collectivism, individualism must be discouraged. I think he was still in high school at the time. And he was busy bombarding me with all this information (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

Lydia Kompe returned to Johannesburg in 1974 after her long stay in the rural areas during her marriage. Kompe found a job at a knitting factory. However, like most female dominated sectors, the wages were lower compared to male dominated industries.

I worked there for about five to six months and then I got another job at Heinerman electric in Weinberg [north of Johannesburg]. At least we were paid twenty-five Rands (R25) a week, while in the knitting factory we were paid six Rands (R6) per week. I worked there until the factory moved to Elandsfontein. ... We started joining the union from 1974 but that was kept a secret because you could be victimised for being a union member. In 1976 we wanted our union to be recognised. That time black trade unions were not allowed to register, but they could be recognised and a house agreement could be signed between the employer and the workers. So we wanted that in our company. Then in March, before the June 16 massacre,<sup>129</sup> we had a big strike where the police were called in. They refused to recognise our union and they wanted us to use the works committee (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

After a long battle with the company, Kompe, who led the strike as the shop steward in the company, and some of her colleagues lost the court case against their dismissal in 1978.<sup>130</sup> It was after this that her union MAWU employed her as an organiser. Later on she was requested by MAWU to organise the transport sector:

MAWU asked me to organise the Transport and General Workers' Union in the Transvaal. I started that union alone and it was such a challenge because the transport sector is a difficult

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<sup>129</sup> She is referring to the 1976 student protests in Soweto where an estimated 176 students were killed by the police who openly shot at them (See Brink, Malungane, Lebelo, Ntshangase and Krige, 2006).

<sup>130</sup> The events of this strike are reported by Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006) and Webster (1988). However, since the language used in writing about the strikes during this period is gender neutral (often suggesting that the shop stewards who were leading the strikes were male), Kompe's leadership as a woman shop steward in this struggle is not indicated.

sector to work in because you never find those workers. They are always on the road. And the employers are very sneaky people and very difficult, they have small little businesses here and there and very difficult and would never give you access (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

Also important during this period was the exchange of information amongst workers from different places of work about trade union activities. Masangwane complained to her sisters about the working conditions at her workplace in the transport industry: her sisters who "...worked at a company that was already organised by MAWU... offered to help me find a union that could organise at my workplace" (Sibongile Masangwane, interview 2004). According to Masangwane, who in 1983 worked as an administrator at a transport company:

My sisters helped me to find the union. We went to FOSATU and they referred us to a union that was organising in the trucking industry. So I met with Jane Barrett [who was an organiser] and I explained our situation at the company. She encouraged me to organise in the company. I managed to get another colleague to help me organise. It was difficult but we tried. I asked him to target the truck drivers, and I concentrated on those who worked inside the company. It was difficult, you would try to organise some and after 2 weeks you would be called to the office and interrogated by management and asked 'what are you trying to do'? And by doing that, they did not realise that they were fuelling me because I realised that I needed to be persistent (Sibongile Masangwane, interview 2004).

In some instances when workers changed jobs from somewhere that had already been organised, they used their trade union skills to organise in their new workplaces. In November 1987 Nomasonto Rosa Mkhize (fifty-two year old Mkhize is still the only female shop steward at her automobile company) who had worked at OK Bazaars for the last eight years and was in the position of shop steward, joined the automobile company Autolies, in Chamdor near Kagiso, one of the townships in the West Rand. She related her story:

I was from CCAWUSA and so when I started working here, I inquired from my former union about organising workers in my workplace and I was then informed that it was the metal sector and therefore NUMSA was the relevant union. They then arranged for NUMSA to come and organise us and we filled in forms. We arranged our general meetings in the form of braais (barbecues) over the weekends to ensure that as many people would come... With the late Abisae Nkwe, we organised people and we had stop orders and the union was introduced. We were however intimidated by management, and workers were called in individually and asked reasons for joining unions and whether they were in the workplace to work or to be involved in trade unions? But we struggled until they fully recognised the union (Nomasonto Rosa Mkhize, Interview 2004).

The process of organising workers was a challenge, as Mkhize points out. She continued to discuss the strategies used by workers to conceal their organising activities in the workplace.

In that year (1988) it was hectic for us as workers; it was difficult to join trade unions. We had to fill the forms in the toilets where the whites would not see you and give them back to the union official making sure that you would not raise any suspicion. And sometimes we would hand them back in the township. But we managed to organise ourselves, at that time we were about 400 or so. We introduced the union into the company and it was a struggle with management, relations were very tense (Nomasonto Mkhize, Interview 2004).

It is also important to note that trade union organisation during the apartheid era placed a strong emphasis on solidarity and cooperation amongst workers from different workplaces. “In those days unions were not categorised as they are now that one union would organise only in a particular sector” (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004). Unions organised workers irrespective of the sector. More important however, was the emphasis that was placed on organising on the basis of race instead of gender. The objective was to get as many workers as possible to reach the target required for trade union recognition rights in the workplace. This was crucial for most of these women activists, as it opened opportunities for involvement in trade union politics.

In 1980 Veronica Mesatywa, who is now an organiser with SATAWU, worked for OK Bazaars. She narrated her story about being recruited into CCAWUSA in the following way:

When I joined the union the first day I asked myself the question ‘am I doing the right thing?’ Then I said to myself that these other comrades did not say that they only wanted men, but workers to join. Then later on I learned about other women who were active in trade unions, even in other countries. So I told myself that women are entitled to be in the trade unions, for instance women like Ray Alexander who was the founder of the South African Railway and Harbour Workers’ Union (SARHWU, which later merged with the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU), to form the South African Transport and Allied Workers’ Union (SATAWU)) was a woman. And then what encouraged me again is the knowledge that the founder of CCAWUSA is a woman (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

Mesatywa’s doubts about her decision were largely influenced by the context that was dominated by sexist views that regarded political organisation as a male activity. However, the same context also offered her examples of other women who were involved in trade union activities, even within the same union that was

organising in her particular sector. Responding to the question about her doubts whether she made the 'right' decision, she argues that:

Because they were men and I thought that they only wanted to recruit men. But they did not say that. And there were also people saying that trade unions are only for men, women have no part in these organisations. Why do we want to involve ourselves in these things? But for me the fact that they came to the workplace and organised indiscriminately for workers to join CCAWUSA made me realise that I can also become a member of the union. So for me I analysed that I can be a woman and he can be a man, but when we are in the workplace we are all called workers, and that entitles both of us to join unions (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

In convincing herself that she has done the 'right thing,' Mesatywa chooses on one hand to suppress her gender identity, which is different from the male organisers who came to her workplace. Her working-class identity at this point is more important as it places her in the same category as the male organisers, therefore justifying her decision to become a member of a trade union organisation. On the other hand, her gender identity plays a role in her decision-making, as she realised that some of the major trade union organisations were founded by women. By manipulating her different identities, Mesatywa challenges the claim that trade unions are 'only for men.'

Certainly, women's reactions to trade unions were not all the same. Not all women were interested in trade union activities initially. Some of them were young and new to the workplace, and therefore not fully aware of the politics of inequality and racism within there. Busisiwe Msimango (she was a SACTWU shop steward at the time of the interview) from Phiri in Soweto was only 19 years old and had just left school when she started working at a textile factory in early 1973.

When I started working at the factory I was still young. It must have been around 1973. During that time lots of people used to work at factories, especially women... There were women who were shop stewards in the factory. But I had no knowledge about trade unions and the purpose of having shop stewards. We were aware that there was a union in our factory but we did not know how it was supposed to help us. Since we were still young, when they held meetings we would walk out ... At that time for us we were young and we could not find anything interesting about the unions and meetings (Busisiwe Msimango, Interview 2005).

It was only a few years later after she observed management injustices in the various places where she worked that Msimango developed an interest in trade unions. The 1976 student protests and how these were handled by the state also had a major impact on her political consciousness (Busisiwe Msimango,

Interview 2005). Her anger at “the way white people treated black people in the workplace” soon influenced her to challenge management’s bad treatment of her colleagues. In 1981, while working at a company called Rennie Models, she started challenging management’s “arrogant and rude” behaviour towards other women workers in her place of work. She recalls that:

You know I always stood up against injustices. Remember there were pass laws and if you were from outside this region you needed a special permit to work in Johannesburg. So the employer would make working conditions very difficult for such people. I remember I used to fight for these people because I was not happy about the way they were being treated (Busisiwe Msimango, Interview 2005).

In 1983 when two women union organisers came to organise workers at her company, Hepkins which “manufactured plastics for different purposes,” Thabethe was convinced that this would be the solution to the poor working conditions and low wages in her company. She narrates the following:

Around 1983 we were approached by other union organisers (this was for the second time her company was approached by union organisers. The first time in 1981 was not successful). About forty of us went out to meet with them. One of these ladies explained about the unions and how it would help us. She asked about the working conditions and told us that through the union we could challenge such things... (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Because of her conviction that unions could change the working conditions they faced in her company, she took it upon herself to organise her fellow employees. “I told other workers that we should try and organise because once we have the union it would help us change the working conditions in our workplace” (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). Thabethe, with the help of her colleague, organised other workers and “exceeded the fifty percent quota” required for forming a trade union in the workplace and gaining recognition rights.

In most of the interviews with these women activists, racism, poor working conditions and low wages were central issues that motivated them to become involved in trade union organisation. Women were often in low paid sectors, and even those who were ‘lucky’ to be in male dominated sectors that paid higher wages, still faced discrimination in their wages. In the interviews, most women also talked about gender discrimination in the workplace and indicated that as one of the motivating factors for them. As stated earlier, many women were often threatened with dismissal for either refusing the sexual advances of male supervisors or for becoming pregnant. It is in this context that for many women, “... protection against the threat of being dismissed” (Thembi Masondo,

Interview 2004) was central in their mobilisation into trade unions. In their contact with the workers, unions emphasised that they can bring changes in the workplace, and that if workers were organised it would be possible to challenge unfair labour practice in the workplace.

*The process of mobilising: 'strategising and spending sleepless nights planning'*

The process of organising workers into a trade union during the apartheid era was not an easy one. "It was very difficult at that time because everybody was very scared of police involvement" (Alina Rantsolase, 2004). Furthermore, the risks of victimisation were often high, as already mentioned in the earlier sections. In spite of such risks, most of the women activists interviewed in this study still felt that 'there was no turning back' and continued to organise as many workers as required to gain recognition status.

It was difficult but we tried... organising a union in the company was not something you could achieve over a few weeks. You have to first mobilise and strategise, spend sleepless nights planning. You become dedicated and committed to the cause (Sibongile Masangwane, 2004).

The apartheid state and employers used propaganda to dissuade people from associating with trade unions, calling them 'communists' who wanted to cause trouble for workers. Motsoahae, who was working in the textile sector at Patons and Baldwin in 1981, discussed the challenges she faced in convincing workers to join trade unions.

But it was difficult to organise, as I was the only person organising... To get members was really difficult. When we started there were only five of us. The other workers were afraid, they had been told all the negative things about the union, that it was a Xhosa (an ethnic group) union that was going to make people lose their jobs, that we were communists. But I continued. To have five members in one month meant a lot, it showed hard work for gaining members. It took a long time to get a representative number for us to gain company recognition (Lorna Motsoahae, 2004).

In some instances women workers arranged for meetings to be held in the townships to overcome the difficulties of organising workers in the workplace. Meetings in the form of barbecues or get-together parties were organised, and during these events workers would be mobilised to join the trade union. In the quote below, Modise indicates the efficiency of this strategy and the pre-eminence of the networks in the whole process.

Another thing is that we had meetings at our houses. So I would invite those people I was familiar with and they would come over and we would discuss about the trade unions and how they worked. *And it was during the apartheid period and we were really struggling and it was a must for us to join the union* (her own emphasis). So, even men ended up joining us. The strategy of inviting people at home really worked because those you invited would go and inform others they know about the union and influence them to join. The factory was surprised when they discovered that we were organised and had majority membership (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

Gaining the representative number was often no guarantee that management would sign the recognition agreement with the union. As some of the interviews indicate, it was still a struggle for workers to get the company to sign the agreement. Management played ‘hide and seek’ games. This is explained by Masangwane:

...we had an organiser from the union office, and he left and then Susan Shabangu (she is currently the deputy minister of safety and security) was brought in. We struggled together. Our employer had tricks for dodging meeting with the union, he would agree to meet with the union officials but when they came to meet him he would not be available. So the union officials then suggested that we should spy on him and call them whenever he is in the office. We did that and the union came and showed him proof of membership, signed-up membership forms. He was red he was so upset. We realised then that there was no turning back, because once we backed out then it would be easy for him to fire us. We were strong and united (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2004).

### “Women were very militant and fearless of management”

Most often literature on trade unions and workers’ struggles discusses the mobilisation and organisation of workers as a process that is always led by men. The assumption is that since women do not have a working-class consciousness, they are less interested in trade union organisation. However, most of the women activists in this research argued to the contrary. According to these women, it was more difficult to organise men in the early years of trade union formation.

... workers feared white people in this factory. Most of the men were afraid that they would be dismissed. They did not understand that once they joined the union, they could challenge management on ... workplace issues (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

Elizabeth Thabethe, who started organising workers in her company in 1983, argues that women were more likely than their male counterparts to challenge management in the workplace. According to Thabethe, poor wages and feelings of exploitation amongst most of the women in the workforce are prominent factors in the mobilisation of women.

...women were the ones who were more willing to listen and participate in militant actions. If we were to say that we are going to have a work stoppage or demonstration during lunchtime, women would participate in large numbers. Men, a few of them would come but most would say 'hey, we are here to work for our children.' The men who worked in that company were such cowards, they were so fearful of the management... Women were very militant and fearless of management. Even the management was aware of that fact because they would notice that women were always in the forefront whenever we had a work stoppage or demonstration (Elizabeth Thabethe, 2004).

The perceptions of men being fearful or not brave enough were emphasised on several occasions by the different women interviewed in this study. On the one hand these perspectives challenge the common stereotypes of women as being submissive, docile and less interested in political organisations. On the other hand however, these perceptions reflect the dominant masculinity and femininity stereotypes. While following the script of masculinity stereotypes, which prescribes that men should be brave and fearless, women were critical of men who did not conform to this, but at the same time placing much emphasis on women who challenged the dominant stereotype of submissiveness and docility. Since women were regarded as acting outside the confines of the prescribed role, their acts of defiance were held in high esteem. Masangwane admitted that:

I am glad I had the opportunity to be in that industry because I learned a lot. Some people assume that all men are naturally smart by virtue of being men. But that is not the case and being in the trucking industry made me realise so many of their weaknesses. When it comes to the white person, men in the trucking industry were so afraid to be in the forefront and sort out their problems. Their organiser was a woman; their shop steward was a woman... They would say hey these women have helped us and taken us out of the misery (Sibongile Masangwane, 2004).

Nevertheless, strong views about leadership roles and the suitability of women in these positions existed in some quarters of the African male working population. According to some of the women activists in this research, men still perceived women as being the weaker sex, and therefore not the type of people who could lead them in trade union activities, but women like Masangwane turned these

gender stereotypes to their advantage by daring men to join the unions if they were ‘real men.’ She explains that:

Some would tell me that I could not tell them anything as a woman. And my response would be ‘you cannot tell me anything. Where have you ever seen a man being chased by another man, running round the truck?’ I mean I used to see them all the time from my office being whipped by the white boss. I would ask them to explain to me ‘how could another man whip you?’ And I would say to them ‘he (the employer) would not dare do that to me... he can only do it to you.’ And they would say ‘singahlulwa ngumfazi?’ (how can a woman beat us). And you know once you do that to a man you are challenging his manhood, so for some they would end up joining the union once they hear me talking like that (Sibongile Masangwane, 2004).

In some instances women activists also faced challenges of being sexually harassed by those men whom they were trying to organise into the trade unions. ‘Smart’ women like Kompe, who was an organiser for transport workers, however, found ways of dealing with such incidents. In discussing her challenges of organising men into the union, she points out that:

... being a woman just made it worse. And working with all these men was such a challenge; some would come to me and say ‘if you don’t agree to sleep with me I’m going to tell the others not to join the union.’ You know all those things and I managed to overcome that, I would say ok man we’ll talk, and then call the meeting with the hope that I would agree. With membership, you need to be very smart to overcome such challenges (Lydia Kompe, 2005).

## Trade union mobilisation post apartheid era

Trade union mobilisation in the post apartheid era is certainly different from the earlier period. The recruitment of workers into the unions takes place in a free and open context, without the fear or threat of dismissal. More importantly, workers join the workforce already aware of trade unions and their right to belong to one.

Hilda Matjee became a union member immediately she was given a full-time job in 1997. Matjee, who has a background of student political activism, pointed out the importance of aligning herself with an organisation. She remarks that:

Joining the union, remember after I had been active in the Student Representative Council (SRC) structures at school, I knew what we wanted. And I knew that as a worker there is COSATU and that workers need to be organised. I knew that I could not solve workplace problems alone; you have to be organised so that problems could be addressed in a collective rather than individually ... I think for me, I believe in being organised ... Whether its labour or whatever... I used to

belong to a youth club... I have never believed in doing things alone. So when you first become a worker, where would you align yourself, you won't be part of management at a go. If you are still at the worker level there are so many things that are dissatisfactory (Hilda Matjee, Interview 2004).

When Matjee joined the workforce, she had already a formed working-class consciousness. As she eloquently indicates above, she was aware that the workplace has two classes, the workers and management. Being aware of the power that management has over workers, Matjee is also conscious that as a worker, her power in relation to management lies in her collective solidarity with other workers.

In explaining her working-class consciousness, Matjee emphasized the importance of her earlier experiences as a student activist and her awareness of the strength of collective organisation influenced her choice to become a union member.

... That is why I want to say being in the SRC structure motivated me to be a union member. And also the incident with my mother during the strike (her mother refused to take part in a strike for fear of being dismissed and was harassed by fellow workers for being a sell-out), and I realised that it was wrong. She did not know that she had rights to be a union member. That made me say *'I want to be in a union, so that when I have a grievance, the union can represent me and I will be heard'* (Hilda Matjee, Interview 2004).

In the mid-1980s the trade union movement in South Africa was regarded as a powerful force against white oppression and the apartheid regime within most of the African communities. The labour movement challenged not only workplace related issues, but the unjustness of the apartheid system, something which gained them respect amongst these communities. These sentiments were reflected in an interview with Mirriam Khumalo (Interview 2005) who was excited to become part of the trade union movement. Unlike her counterpart Matjee, Khumalo (who is currently the SACCWU shop steward) never had the opportunity of being formally involved in organised politics, but she grew up in an environment where many people, including her brother, were political activists and continually experienced police harassment and arrests.

Her first response to the question on her motivation for being a union member (in 1995) was "the funniest part of it is that I was never told why I should join the union; I was just told that everyone was a union member in the workplace and therefore I should also become a member" (Mirriam Khumalo, Interview 2004). When asked further about her motivation for agreeing to become a member of the trade union when she had the option not to join, Khumalo pointed out her

enthusiasm about the opportunity to be involved in organisational politics. She explains in the following manner:

...I think it was something exciting for me. There was going to be general meetings and all. ...I was learning about the strength and power of SACCAWU. And I was told about the 1989 strike that lasted about six months. And I wished I had been part of that. I thought it would have been very exciting for me. The years went by, and I continued as a union member and attending union meetings (Mirriam Khumalo, Interview 2005).

Louisa Modikwe joined the workforce without any background of activism or involvement in protest activities. Modikwe was born and grew up in Brits, which is in the North West Province (formerly known as Bophuthatswana, which was a Bantustan during the apartheid period). Unlike her peers who come from the Gauteng region, where most of the political activity took place during the 1980s, Modikwe claims to have been less affected by student and community protests during this period. When asked about her origins, she responded thus:

In our area people are not political. We only know which parties to vote for and it ends there. We are not that active. It is only when I moved to Johannesburg that I came across activism (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

The apartheid state and the Bantustan authorities created a propaganda image of the political struggle and the unrest in the country. “During those days we were made to fear anything that had to do with politics. We had the fear that comrades will come and kill us... So we were left behind politically...” (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2004). Modikwe began working in 1996 at a textile factory and:

...I began reading books, political books... and the way our employer treated us ... reading those books... and then you find that your employer is mistreating you, when those two things connected it did something to me (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

Modikwe’s democratic context allows her to read political books, which were illegal and banned in the apartheid era. Unlike her counterparts in the earlier period, the democratic and free context allows her access to information. When she joined her place of work, they were organised by a “rival union and we did not have benefits and it seemed they [the union] did not care” (Interview 2005). Without any experience in trade union organisation, she took the initiative and mobilised her fellow workers to strike against low wages and to demand a provident fund.

So I started organising the workers as I was aware that since we were only six (members of SACTWU), the strike would not be successful. So I began mobilising other workers and managed to convince a few. We went on the strike but because we were fewer that did not last long. We had to go back to work. But the company got the message and they gave us an increase, but still we did not get the provident fund. Then I went back to the workers and I explained to them that the problem is that we have fewer SACTWU members. And if most of us joined SACTWU and gained majority membership, that would help us address some of the grievances that we had against management. The union that we had in the company then, had not done much for us (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

Asked how she came to the conclusion that SACTWU was the best union to represent their interests in the workplace, Modikwe pointed out that she ‘conducted her own investigation’ about working conditions in other factories.

When I came into the factory, I conducted my own investigations to find out about other workers’ working conditions and benefits in their companies. I used to go round different companies and ask about their unions and how they were working. I questioned how come they had better benefits when we were all working in similar industries. So after talking to workers in other companies, I took that information back to the workers in my factory. I began holding general meetings and asking workers to debate on the provident fund. But the whole process was not easy. The problem was that when workers were not interested in the union, they would go and report to management that they were being intimidated. But I went to management and I denied those allegations and questioned how possible was it to force people to sign the joining forms. It was really a struggle because employers always want to have it easy (Louisa Modikwe, Interview 2005).

Key issues in Modise’s discussion are firstly her awareness of her freedom of association in the workplace. Realizing that the union that already existed in her workplace was not effective in representing their rights, Modise made the decision to organise workers into a different union, SACTWU, which has more recognition and respect. Secondly, like her counterpart Matjee, she reflects on her consciousness of collective identity and its critical place in achieving their demands in the workplace.

Forty-year old Violet Seboni begun working at Supreme Head and Cap in 1989 and was elected to a shop steward position the following year. Unlike her peers who were eager to join the trade unions, Seboni was not enthusiastic in the beginning. She explains that:

In August 1989 I began working and when I joined, my company had a closed shop agreement and the union was SACTWU. In September I was made permanent and automatically became a

union member. In 1990 the union had elections and I was elected as a shop steward. I was elected because I was able to speak on behalf of my colleagues and I would ask questions during the union meetings. ...When I was elected into the shop steward position I was not very sure about being a union activist (Violet Seboni, Interview 2005).

When asked her reasons for being hesitant about being a shop steward, Seboni, who was only twenty five at the time, raised the issue of being young and attending union meetings instead of social activities in the township. She pointed out that:

I did not understand that thing of missing out on my weekends and I was still young. I was basically a township girl and spending weekends in meetings... I did not understand that especially since I am a person who likes soccer (Violet Seboni, Interview 2005).

The turning point for Seboni was after her experience of racism in a hospital that only served white people until 1990. She explains that:

On the 14<sup>th</sup> of October 1990 I was injured during the train violence.<sup>131</sup> The train I was travelling in was attacked and I was one of the people who jumped off the train and I slipped and fractured my leg. I was then taken to Johannesburg hospital, and it was for the first time that year they had opened for blacks. There was a lot of apartheid amongst the nurses and they were disgusted at having to nurse African patients. So once I overheard one of the nurses gossiping about me and making racist comments. I confronted them. After that incident, I started attending union meetings seriously (Violet Seboni, Interview 2005).

The whole context of racism and discrimination in all quarters of society influenced these women's decision to become active trade union members. Their explanations of how they changed their attitudes towards trade unions demonstrate that trade union mobilisation during this period could not be confined to workplace related experiences or issues. Trade union organisation offered these activists the opportunity to become part of a collective structure and challenge injustices in their environment.

## Empowerment of women workers by trade unions

The organisation of trade unions in the workplace empowered most of the women in this research who were in the forefront of workers' struggles. Upon establishing contact with the trade unions and taking the initiative to organise

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<sup>131</sup> In the early 1990s during the transition period, there were frequent attacks and killings on the trains which were part of the political violence prior to the democratisation of South Africa.

workers at their places of work, most of these women were approached to participate in trade union education. This was an important education for many of them, especially in the case of those who left school early.

I learned most of the things from the unions, as I have already told you that I never went far with my education. Even words like negotiations I learned them from here. Even communicating in English I learned here in the unions. What I also liked about the unions is that one was always free to communicate in one's own language. And even if you attempted to speak in English, no one laughed if you made mistakes. And that helped one to become used to communicating in the language (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

The process of trade union education was important in building workers' confidence in expressing themselves in the workplace, particularly in defending themselves against management. Often, language barriers limited the extent to which workers could express and defend themselves. Another crucial aspect of trade union education was understanding the "workplace language," especially when it concerned negotiations with management. "... It exposed one to a lot of things that we were not aware of. For instance workers' rights in the workplace like the right to representation, the right to negotiate with management when you have grievances" (Thembi Nabe, Interview 2004).

In underlining the role of trade union education, Busisiwe Msimango contended that "training was important ... because it helped one gain basic skills for dealing with management in the workplace" (Interview 2005). Msimango, who herself is "not an educated person," argues that since many people in the workplace were not educated, this made it easy for employers to "abuse and exploit" African workers (Interview 2005).

These skills were particularly useful in the initial stages of trade union mobilisation when most of the workers did not have much information or education in workplace issues or their rights as workers. According to the women interviewed, their newly gained knowledge empowered them to confront management. In the quote below Modise describes the workplace context during apartheid, whereby supervisors often abused their power over the workers. She explains her role in challenging this situation:

The supervisors we had at the time were very stubborn and would not listen to black workers. They always wanted to push their point of view, even when they were wrong. They would never accept that they were wrong especially when it came to black people. I was always brave to confront white people with such issues and that gained me a lot of support from my colleagues. What helped me a lot was attending union meetings, workshops and seminars. We were made

aware of the problems we should expect in the workplace, how to handle grievances, and also about the Labour Relations Act (Faith Modise, interview 2004).

Observing women workers challenging management, men in some of these workplaces developed confidence in their leadership skills. While leadership position was a challenge for these women, the successes against management validated their roles as leaders in spite of their gender. In the following quote, Elizabeth Thabethe talks about her experience when she led a strike in her company.

We had a strike for six weeks in our company over wages and conditions of employment. We had to mobilise all the workers to support the strike, especially male workers. We had to make them understand about the union and the need for a strike to achieve our demands as workers. During the strike, management brought in scab workers, but at the same time they felt the effect because they made losses. In the end we reached an agreement with management and won our demands. But it was tough, if you are a leader .... I mean if you are a leader... when I was alone I would wonder what would happen if all these people lost their jobs... But we won in the end. *They accepted me as their leader, even though I was a woman* (Elizabeth Thabethe, 2004).

## Women activists define their mobilisation and actions

Women's acts of protests or challenge of the political system are often explained in maternal terms.<sup>132</sup> It is often perceived as an extension of their maternal roles into the political arena. Responses of women interviewed in this research, however, contradict such assertions. "They [women] were involved not because they were women, but because they were citizens in this country and mostly because they felt the need to change the situation"<sup>133</sup> (Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004).

To me it was not about my family, it was about South Africa as a whole. But still I would have never allowed my children to be harassed by the police or the state. To me it was about the South African citizens who were suffering. I could not picture myself sitting back, watching people struggling to achieve rights that I myself was also denied (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

In explaining their political mobilisation and activism, women trade unionists emphasise the racist nature of apartheid oppression. Their explanations largely highlight feelings of identity and solidarity on the basis of race. Women's

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<sup>132</sup> See chapter one.

<sup>133</sup> As shown in earlier sections, trade union activism under apartheid was not only limited to workplace issues, it also meant involvement in broader political issues.

experiences of discrimination and mobilisation on the basis of race influences their conceptualisation of citizenship and rights. This also has implications on their perceptions of their role as women in the struggle for achieving these rights.

... but I am also saying that women are big girls they don't allow grass to grow under their feet and just say well it's a men's job... Women fought against carrying the pass... We fought against it and we put our foot down. So it is not just about motherhood... but it was about us to say that we've got to be heard ... we were fighting against discrimination and it was not just for women. We were all discriminated against ... I have always been a human rights fighter... (Emma Mashinini, Interview 2004).<sup>134</sup>

Women like Thabethe believe that their commitment and sacrifice in the struggle was important in overturning the political system. She explains that,

... because you cannot sit back and fold your arms when things are not going well in the workplace, and at the same time when you went outside the workplace we had the state of emergency, you could not go to certain places at particular times. So the kind of life we were living was just not right, something had to be done. And by coming together and struggling as a group was the only way to fight against the oppression. I was aware that anything could happen to me. But then I told myself that if I did not sacrifice my life for freedom, then who should (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

The quotes above highlight the fact that women's involvement in political struggles is not necessarily based on gender roles, but influenced by social circumstances, which interfere with their 'normal' way of living. The political context within which women became activists is important. Efforts to advance their 'human rights' and their 'citizenship rights' were at the core of their politics. By the same token, women were redefining the conceptualisation of citizenship and human rights and inserting a gender category.

Even so, these women did not identify themselves or their struggles with feminism. Many of the women interviewed admitted their lack of knowledge about the term or the debates surrounding feminism. One of the women interviewed explained in the following:

No I didn't even understand the word feminism. I didn't even know what feminism was about. But I was just trying to do what was right for us as women, not even knowing that these issues were linked with feminism. I was just saying I don't want this to happen to me. I got to know

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<sup>134</sup> In her book *Strikes have followed me all my life*, Emma Mashinini (1989) documents her struggles in organising the largest retail sector union. She also talks about her battles with the state, her imprisonment, and psychological torture while in prison.

about feminism in 1990 when we went to the Malibongwe conference because feminists hosted us (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

## Conclusion

This chapter has examined the experiences of women activists in the workplace. It argues these women's experiences of racism and gender discrimination in the workplace are important in helping us understand their mobilisation and leading role in trade union organisation. Their experiences reflect the centrality of race and racial discrimination in their motivations to organise trade unions and challenge management authority. Collective identity and solidarity in the workplace is achieved on the basis of racial identity. This collective identity is often used to mark the boundaries between workers and management, and is used as a collective tool in challenging management. The discussions with women activists show further that even within the post democratic South Africa, these race relations in the workplace are still dominant.

This research suggests that the centrality of race in workplace struggles in the apartheid era has had a negative impact on the development of solidarity amongst women of different racial groupings. The race based hierarchy and privilege system for women of different racial groupings frustrated the possibilities of solidarity on gender based issues. It is shown further that the continued dominance of race within the workplace is still a challenge to this kind of solidarity.

This chapter also reflects on the different opportunity structures in the mobilisation of women of different generations interviewed in this research. For instance, the apartheid context, which created fear, job insecurity and lack of proper representation in the workplace, stimulated the mobilisation of women into trade union activities in the earlier period. The post apartheid context of democracy and protected rights in the workplace facilitated the mobilisation and organisation of the younger generation into trade unions.

This chapter has highlighted the opportunities which trade union involvement offered to most of the women interviewed in this research. Many of them gained the opportunity to learn about workers' rights within the workplace and also to understand labour relations. This knowledge empowered most of these women who were 'brave' to challenge white men in a context where everybody was afraid.

## Gender Struggles at the Personal Level<sup>135</sup>

### Introduction

Trade unions as public institutions or organisations are gendered. The participation of women and men is influenced by their gender identities. Women, as a group to which society assigns a subordinate status, are often confronted with different challenges to those faced by their male counterparts. Apart from the fact that women always suffer from discrimination within these organisations, which also affects their full participation in trade union activities, women's limited power and control within their personal relationships restricts their level of involvement in trade unions. This chapter explores how women address the challenges arising from control and domination within the household sphere and their personal relationships. The chapter underscores the different approaches that women adopt in subverting male power and dominance in the household sphere. It is further demonstrated how the changes in the meaning and value attached to being married or single in South Africa influence women's decisions to pursue their trade union activism at any cost. The acceptance of divorced and single women with children in the South African society enables women to make choices that meet their personal interests.

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<sup>135</sup> The names of the interviewees have been changed in this chapter to protect the details of their private lives.

## ‘Sacrifice, determination and commitment’

Trade union organisation is largely based on the notion of members who have no household or childcare responsibilities, or have the ability to impose such responsibilities on their significant family members (who are often female). Because the participants are mostly full-time workers, union meetings or activities are often after working hours and over the weekends.<sup>136</sup> Women and men experience participation in trade unions differently because of their different gender identities. Siphokazi Mgoma explains the differences between women and men in terms of their participation in trade unions.

The most important thing in the unions is to have the opportunity to attend meetings because that is where you are developed. Most women don't attend meetings because they are married and they must go home to cook and do all those things. But as a woman, whether you are married or not, you still have to fulfil those responsibilities, which is too much for a woman. For a man to go to meetings and to bring reading material home is easier. And you find that they are more advanced than women simply because they have more time to attend meetings and to read, which women do not have (Siphokazi Mgoma, Interview 2004).

Trade unions, which are modelled on masculine principles, often require activists to dedicate large amounts of time to their interests. Full participation in trade union activities is therefore defined in male terms. Commitment and sacrifice are important aspects of trade union activism, and this means that trade union activists are willing to work after hours to meet the objectives of the organisation. Lerato Modise explains her initial involvement in trade union activities in the early 1980s below:

... When I joined the union I was not aware of the sacrifices that I would have to make. At that time we were supposed to attend shop steward council meetings and I was supposed to represent my company. ... I realised then that it was a lot of work. It is just the determination that one had, I just told myself that people elected me to represent them and although it was not easy, I had to do my best because at the end of the day we will benefit in terms of fighting for our rights at work. ... So if I had to spend most of my time attending union meetings, it meant that was how trade unions operated and that was the only way I was going to get information and understand more about trade unions and workers' rights (Lerato Modise, Interview 2004).

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<sup>136</sup> See Franzway's (2001) discussion of the notion of 'greedy institutions' and the constraints or demands it places on women trade unionists.

## Different strokes for different folks: how women address their subordinate positions within personal relationships

In chapter four, I stressed the unequal power relations between women and men in their personal relationships. Often women are subjected to the control and domination from their boyfriends or husbands. The gendered power relations within the household often mean that men have authority over decisions such as union activism. In the discussion about her activism and the challenges she faces as a woman, fifty-year old Nomasonto Ngwenya, who is separated from her husband, highlighted the unequal power relations between women and men in their personal relationships. She argues that:

... marriage plays a role. My husband at that time was not happy with my trade union activities, attending union meetings and coming back late. So I would attend meetings and leave early before the meeting was concluded. My husband would complain that as a woman it was not acceptable for me to come back late, 'you need to be at home.' The other woman (... who was elected with me was a senior shop steward) was single because her husband had passed away, so she was able to attend most of the union meetings (Nomasonto Ngwenya, Interview 2005).

The dominance of patriarchal norms and values in society often dictate 'normal' behaviour for women. In this instance, it is considered abnormal for a woman to come back home late when she has household duties to perform. Women who do not abide by these norms are often considered deviant. In some cases of married women, the family-in-law often exercises its influence over their daughter-in-law. According to Siphokazi Qhirha, her husband's family influenced his decision to leave her and seek a divorce. She explains that although he was not "conservative" and assisted with household responsibilities and their daughter while she attended her trade union activities:

... His family was not happy about my activities and they were putting tremendous pressure on him. Arguing that I am not acting like a woman, I was not an exemplary wife, that when they had mokete (traditional celebrations/ceremonies) I was never able to attend those because I had meetings. So they told him that he must start looking for a responsible woman who would look after the family, who would take care of him. ... Then you must know that you would have a lot of names, you are not attending meetings, and rather you are out with men. I think that is the most difficult part when it comes to women leadership in the union movement ... (Siphokazi Qhirha, Interview 2004).

The traditional norms dictate that a woman should always be at home taking care of her husband and children, and not in the 'wilderness.' For women like Margaret Maseko whose husband went along with her activism, the roles were reversed in the household. Once she was elected to a shop steward position, her husband remained at home and took care of the children and household duties while she was attending to her union commitments. However, as in Qhira's situation, this went against the norms, and Maseko was condemned not only by her in-laws, but also her neighbours. She explains:

So he would do the laundry, ironing. Even my kids got used to the set up such that even when they were looking for their clothes or something they would ask their father. It was not easy; I had to deal with in-laws who could not understand the kind of life that I had chosen. But my husband stood his ground and supported me, and I salute him. It is not very easy when you are a woman and you become an activist because you would always get these labels ... and so on. And it is so sad because these are things said by other women ... At that time when you were a woman involved in the struggle you had a stigma attached to you. Even my neighbours isolated me because I was seen as this woman who was different. 'And this 'poor' man is always at home doing all the household chores while she was never at home' (Margaret Maseko, Interview 2004).

Forty-five year old Pauline Goitsimang was elected as the SACCAWU shop steward in 1989 (at the time of the interview she was an administrator for SACCAWU). Her union activism put a strain on her marriage and family life such that at times:

I felt that it was enough and I wanted to stop my union activism... I felt that I had children to look after and it was not good for my children to see us fighting all the time... (Interview 2004).

In addressing her family conflict, Goitsimang requested another female activist who had long been in trade unions to talk to her partner about the 'nature' of trade union activism. She explains that her husband:

... had a problem with the meetings, especially when I had to sleep over. He was very difficult until I approached another woman comrade (Margaret Maseko) to try and speak to him. She explained to him about the nature of our work and he understood. And I began to be free. But he still called to check on me (Interview 2004).

Thoko Ndabezitha, who is also in her early forties, faces a similar challenge from her husband who is not supportive of her trade union involvement. Ndabezitha is a national gender coordinator in one of the unions, while her husband is also a

regional senior official in one of the unions affiliated to COSATU. In spite of both of them being involved in the trade unions and having in-depth awareness of the demands it imposes on activists, her husband has consistently refused to assist her with childcare and domestic chores. In lessening the burden for herself, she has employed domestic help to assist with the “household duties and the children.”

But my husband is not happy with that. He is also an activist in the unions. But he would say that ‘you know, let us agree that union issues should be left in the union. Don’t talk gender [equality] in here, gender would not happen in this family.’ And at work he is supposed to be the champion of gender struggles, he coordinates gender activities. But when he comes home, it’s a different story altogether ... Like when I moved from being a local organiser to the national office, it was such a big issue with him. Moving to the national office meant that I would earn more than he did. It meant that I would have more exposure. It was such a big fight with him when I had to attend union activities. He would want to know for how long I would be away, and if I was gone for the whole week what about the children. I think it is still an issue of control ... I mean he does not have grounds for complaining because with the household, everything is taken care of (Thoko Ndabezitha, Interview 2004).

Children and household chores, which are largely women’s responsibilities, are often a draw back for many women trade unionists. These are often the excuses used by most men in demanding that their partners spend more time in the house. As Ndabezitha clearly highlights in her narrative, her husband’s issues are about ‘control’ and power in the household. Her move to the national office comes with more responsibilities and influence for Ndabezitha, and as she mentions, higher income as well. In traditional terms, men often associate themselves with career success and financial power, therefore Ndabezitha’s success in her trade union career challenges her husband’s traditional views and undermines the power structure within the household.

In spite of the problems and difficulties within her relationship, Ndabezitha still considers herself better off than many women since she can still maintain her activism in the union through her financial power. Ndabezitha contends that, unlike many women who in most cases have been forced to abandon their activism, she has the financial power to ‘do what I want to do.’ She goes on to argue that:

A number of women are unable to attend because of family commitments. I am attending because I am fortunate... because I can afford to have someone to help with those responsibilities. Otherwise I would not be active ... So I am able to sustain my activism because

I can afford it.<sup>137</sup> But what about those women who cannot afford it? ... So imagine in other families? I am talking about a regional secretary of a union here ... We have three children and all of that is my responsibility. Imagine someone who is married to a man who is not in the unions and has no clue about how unions operate ... I am in a better position because I can afford, and in the sense that I have decided that this is what I want to do and I am going to go ahead with it, whether he likes it or not (Thoko Ndabezitha, Interview 2004).

Ndabezitha's situation raises particular dynamics in relationships between women and men within the household. With the changes in South Africa over the last thirty years, large numbers of women have joined the labour market, and there have been significant opportunities for growth and career success for some of these women. Men's financial power in the household is often central in the control and domination of their partners within the family. However, with the roles reversed this produces different power dynamics within Ndabezitha's relationship. Her husband is holding on to his patriarchal power in that, as a man, he refuses to be involved in household chores or childcare responsibilities, and therefore Ndabezitha still has to shoulder these responsibilities as his wife. However, Ndabezitha's financial independence somehow undermines her husband's power in that she also has the ability to entrust these responsibilities to another woman. The financial independence she has gives her the power to delegate responsibilities in the household while she attends to her union activities.

Nevertheless, the opposition of these women's partners to their trade union activism is not only restricted to household issues, but their husbands'/boyfriends' perceptions about trade unions also play a role. Trade unions are commonly regarded as male dominated organisations, and in some situations these perceptions have an impact on how some men react to their women's involvement in trade union activities. This is particularly the case when women attend overnight meetings or travel on trade union related activities. According to Malebo Qumbu, her husband "understood" her trade union activism. She relates:

The only problem that he would have was when I had to attend meetings and not come back home... You know how men always think, that you could end up being involved with other men ... I was on the National Executive Council and I had to travel for meetings in Durban and I would travel with my male comrades. So when I came back he would be in bad moods ... But with time he came to understand and I would invite other union officials and we would hold

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<sup>137</sup> In her study of black domestic workers in the early 1980s, Cock (1980:10) remarks that maids and madams are both victims of discrimination in this society, discrimination that maintains them in subordinate... positions. However, the employment of maids frees madams in various ways...

meetings in the house for him to see what goes on when I'm attending union meetings (Malebo Qumbu, Interview 2004).

Qumbu illustrates that in spite of her husband's objection, she still continued to be active. She also points out that while she directly challenged her husband's control over her, she was also negotiating her right to be active in the union by inviting him to participate in some of the meetings with the aim of making him understand trade union activities. This is further illustrated in the following:

But sometimes I used to travel with him to these meetings. When I was president of the NUTW (National Union of Textile Workers) in the 1980s he came along to the annual general meeting. And he was impressed to see me addressing that meeting as the president; he could not believe that it was me. He was saying 'oh I did not know that you were such an important person; I did not know that you were doing such an important job.' After that he began to relax about my union travelling. By the time he passed away, he had come to understand (Malebo Qumbu, 2004).

Although most women activists in the workplace used 'militant' and confrontational approaches in dealing with the power relations between themselves as workers and management, these interviews show that some of them avoided such approaches in their household. This is because women regard the relationships at home as more personal and unlike in the workplace, there are deep emotional feelings involved, (Nomasonto Ngwenya, interview 2005). According to Ngwenya (Interview 2004), "at home it's different because you are married. Your boss, you are only related through work after work you both go your separate ways. But your husband you live with him in the house."

This research shows that in some cases men's resistance to their partner's involvement in trade union activities is also influenced by the dominant stereotypes that often regard women in male dominated arenas as sexual objects. According to forty one year old Jabulile Sokhulu who is a shop steward at a furniture shop, her ex-boyfriend restricted her activities even at church because of "his insecurities." In 1991 she started work in her current job and "became active... When I told him about the union and that I wanted to attend union meetings he said to me... 'unions are about men, women looking for men and being exploited by men'" (Jabulile Sokhulu, interview 2005).

While in the past Sokhulu was submissive to her ex-boyfriend, in a controlling and abusive relationship, she was determined to continue her trade union involvement. "I felt very strong about my union activism and I was not prepared to let anything get in my way." In addition, she felt:

... that he was infringing on my rights and that my freedom was being limited. I wanted my freedom then ... I felt that enough was enough, he could do what he wanted, and I didn't care. I wanted to become active in the unions and he was not going to stop me from that ... (Jabulile Sokhulu, interview 2005).

In explaining her sudden assertiveness in challenging the power relations and abuse within her relationship, Sokhulu refers to the political context during the early 1990s. She indicates her 'curiosity' and desire to be part of the political action as the country was undergoing dramatic political transformation. According to her this was "an exciting period" which she wanted to be part of through her union activism.

More importantly, her trade union activism and participation in the union's gender structures<sup>138</sup> was central in raising her gender consciousness. In a follow-up question about the statement she made earlier about her 'rights' I asked her at what point did she begin to realise that she had rights within her relationship and what influenced that? Her response was:

I think within the union, we had these structures, like gender structures. So in these structures we talked about these issues. We talked about issues of love, and how sometimes we women tend to be abused within these relationships all in the name of love. Through participation in structures like that, your eyes are opened. And you begin to realise that what's happening in your relationship is not right (Jabulile Sokhulu, interview 2007).

In a few cases of the women activists interviewed, husbands cooperated with their wives and supported their trade union activism. The shared context of apartheid and workplace struggles meant that women and men had experiences in common. In answering the question about how her trade unionism impacted on her relationship with her husband, Maria Masote responded in this way:

He was also a union member so he understood how it worked. We shared ideas here in the house; we discussed our problems at work together. Most people were union members, so it was not such a big surprise. My husband never gave me problems because even before I started working, I was active at the community level. So from home, before getting married I was an activist and my husband knew that. My mother in-law had problems at first but she got used to it (Maria Masote, Interview 2004).

The working-class identity was central in uniting women and men in the struggle against the apartheid state and the employers in the workplace. In some instances, this shared identity even extended into the household, where husbands

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<sup>138</sup> Gender structures will be discussed in detail in chapter seven.

supported their wives' activism, based on common understanding of the struggles of workers. It was this shared understanding that women like Qumbu turned to her advantage and introduced her husband to trade union politics. She narrates the following story:

When I explained to him, he understood. I first explained to him about trade unions, what they were and how they worked. His workplace had not been organised yet. So when I explained about trade unions he understood because he knew how the Boers treated us in the workplace, and he also had his own experiences in the workplace. I always ensured that when coming back from the union meetings, I discussed with him and share with him what I had learned. So he was also interested and he began to understand trade union politics. And fortunately his company was later organised by NUMSA and then he joined the union. So we used to share information and ideas (Malebo Qumbu, Interview 2004).

Union activism changed how some of these women addressed the gendered power relations within the household. Their appointment to leadership roles in the workplace influenced how they came to perceive decision-making concerning their personal choices. This is illustrated by Margaret Maseko's narrative:

When I was elected [as a shop steward in 1984], it was so funny because I did not even think that I could be elected. I was excited and I accepted. When I went back home and told my husband that I was elected and I have accepted the position, he said 'you accepted, but why didn't you come back and discuss it with me first.' I said what? They elected me; it is about me (Margaret Maseko, Interview 2004).

According to Maseko, the decision to accept her election to a trade union leadership position in the workplace was her personal concern, and not her husband's. Maseko's attitude about her decision to accept her election as a shop steward without first consulting her husband challenges the norms of a patriarchal relationship. It is often expected that the woman will first seek permission from her husband. Explaining her approach on this issue, Maseko states that:

He was still expecting that he would make decisions on my behalf. So he discovered that I was a *changed monster* who said that I am elected as a shop steward, I have accepted and I am going to be a leader. That was without taking him through the steps ... I had this burning thing inside me that said 'I don't care who says what, nobody is going to stand in front of me'. I have given them my position and I will do it (that is being a trade union activist) (Margaret Maseko, Interview 2004).

Maseko's new role as a union leader and a political activist transformed gender roles within her household. "... Being a shop steward ... resulted in me spending time away from home attending union meetings, running away from the police..." Her husband made "his choice" to be at home and take care of the children after realizing that "I was deeply involved," while Maseko made her choice to be involved in political action. She explains that:

Here I was, a *married woman* (her own emphasis) who was supposed to be at home all the time, here I was a *mother* (her own emphasis), and my children needed me. And I had to jump, jump... and look at the broader struggle. Meaning that during that time, somehow there were compromises, because I had to make a difficult choice ... When I was elected I became dedicated, committed and loyal to the cause. And the cause was to *lead in honesty* (her own emphasis) and that meant I was prepared to even die for the cause ... (Margaret Maseko, 2004).

In this narrative, Maseko underscores the different identities and roles she assumed once she became involved in the working-class and political battles. She was a married woman, a mother and a leader committed to the political struggle. Although Maseko makes reference to her identity as a mother, she does not reflect on this identity as her motivation to be active in the politics of the workplace. Rather, her identity as a worker, fighting for the rights of African workers and the liberation of South Africa is what drove her into activism.

## Married women forced to make a choice

As already noted, trade union activism is generally regarded as a 'tough' career that requires dedication and great amounts of time from participants.<sup>139</sup> It often requires activists to be available beyond normal working hours and at weekends. As has been shown above, for most women active in these organisations, these demands place a strain on their personal relationships. Sindiwe Mabena for instance, became involved in trade union activities in the early 1970s, but after she got married<sup>140</sup> she eventually 'became less active because of the fighting at home.'

... He did not understand why I had to travel a lot. He used to call a lot every time I was away and he would demand that I come back home. So it came to a point when I had to raise it in the union that I had problems with my husband, that he was not happy about my union activism ... but there were complaints also in the union and then when you went back home you had to deal with the fighting. So there was no support from the union or at home. My mother was angry

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<sup>139</sup> See Franzway (2001).

<sup>140</sup> About seven of the women activists interviewed were married.

about it, she did not like the fact that somebody just came into my life and wanted to control me. But it was difficult. So I became less active because of the fighting at home (Sindiwe Mabena, Interview 2005).

The narrative above highlights issues with which many women trade unionists are often confronted. Male control and dominance face women at both the trade union level and at the household level. Women have to fight battles at home to continue their union activism, while at the same time they have to fight another battle within the labour movement to be accepted in leadership positions. Sindiwe Mabena occupied the position of the general secretary in 1984 when she was forced to resign. This was a crucial political period for the labour movement in South Africa, a year before COSATU was launched. Trade union official positions had gained considerable political influence because of the critical period in the liberation struggle at the time.<sup>141</sup> Political influence often comes with power, which is not an attribute often associated with women.

As already shown in the discussion above, women have adopted varying approaches to addressing the issue of control and domination in relationships. In some of the extreme cases where they have realised that their husbands' constraining and controlling behaviour interferes with their union activism, women have opted for divorce.

Siphokazi Qhirha who since 1984 is a full-time shop steward and national negotiator in her union, divorced her husband in 1985.<sup>142</sup> According to her, trade union activism "is very difficult" and it is more so for women who are married and have children. She went on to argue that:

... If you can look at most of the women who are activists, most of them are single parents. If you get there and you are still married, at some point you will have to make a choice between your marriage and your career as an activist. It is not easy; it is not easy (Siphokazi Qhirha, Interview 2004).

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<sup>141</sup> Women like Thembi Nabe, Maggie Magubane, Refiloe Ndzuta and Chris Bonner (including Emma Mashinini who left CCAWUSA in 1984 when power struggles within her union became dominant) who had been trade union general secretaries in the earlier period lost their positions during this period. The mid – 1980s were crucial in the political struggle. Trade unions had consolidated their power as their membership had grown, the mass liberation struggle was also gaining strength with the Mass Democratic Movement and trade unions were critical in the broader liberation struggle. Official positions were regarded as a key source of power and influence (see Tshoaedi, 1999 for detailed discussion).

<sup>142</sup> Three of the women activists interviewed were divorced and two of them were separated/going through a divorce.

She went on to express the freedom experienced from being single and not having to account for her activities. According to Qhirha, her ability to participate in key trade union activities has facilitated her successful career within the unions. She suggests that:

... not having a husband is an advantage when you are in the union. You are never at home because there are various meetings to be attended, and that takes you away from home. I must tell you that since I served in the structures of the union from 1978 till now [2004] ... I was ... not there (home) because I had to attend regional meetings, regional executives, Regional Office Bearer's (ROB) meetings, I had to attend national structures ... After work you would have to go to a meeting (not home) in town till about eight o'clock at night then travel back home. I think I was fortunate because I was not married, I am divorced and I am staying alone (Siphokazi Qhirha, Interview 2004).

As Qhira's case illustrates above, the decision to seek a divorce is a direct challenge to male control by some of these women. It is also a rejection of the persistent patriarchal mindset (Nomasonto Ngwenya, Interview 2005) that fails to take into account the changing dynamics within the South African society and in these women's lives.

Nomsa Gwegwe who is forty-eight years old and a shop steward in the retail sector was "in the process of a divorce as we speak" (Interview 2004). Her husband's refusal to cooperate or support her choices and decision to be an activist has led to their conflict. She acknowledges the demands of trade union activism on women. She points out that trade union schedule often means that activists are mostly away from home:

... For the whole week or more than that ... And as a woman you will have problems at home...The union takes up a lot of your time, and you end up not being able to fully attend to issues at home (Nomsa Gwegwe, Interview 2005).

Although aware of the challenges posed by trade union activism for married women like her, Gwegwe admits her passion for trade union activism.

I enjoy trade union activism and I would not trade it for anything. It is like I am addicted to this kind of life. You know when you meet comrades and some of the people whom you have assisted with work related matters, you get the joy ... (Nomsa Gwegwe, Interview 2005).

## The freedom of not being married<sup>143</sup>

Some of the women interviewed in this research are unmarried or are widowed and indicate that they have no plans to marry, particularly with the challenges that have been highlighted in the foregoing discussion. Being single is considered as a solution to the constraints experienced by married women. Petunia Qhawe divorced her husband in the early 1980s and has never re-married. In discussing her current relationship, she states that:

One thing I have made clear is that I do not want to account for my activities or to ask for permission for my movements. I think that is one problem that married women are facing which I do not think I will be able to stand for (Petunia Qhawe, Interview 2004).

Mary Mkhwanazi (forty-year old) and Rethabile Mashilo (thirty-seven years old) are single parents who have separated from their children's fathers because of the disagreements over trade union involvement. Asked about her relationship with the deceased father of her children, Mkhwanazi explains "I ended the relationship with him because I felt that it was not worth giving up my trade union activism" (Mary Mkhwanazi, Interview 2005). In the case of Mashilo, she states that:

He felt that this thing of gender [equality] is getting too much into my head and he could not tolerate that. The other thing is that he felt I was too involved in trade unions ... he was always complaining about me travelling... (Rethabile Mashilo, Interview 2005).

For some women whose husbands had died, they also chose to remain unmarried. Bongiwe Mtamo's (sixty-years old) husband passed away two months after they got married in 1972. She became a single parent to their young son and never married again. "I felt that I could do without a husband. Up until today I can do without a husband. I could do things for myself and there was no need to rely on a husband" (Bongiwe Mtamo, Interview 2004). This was a similar feeling that forty-five year old Lerato Modise had after her husband passed away in 1983 when she was only 23 years of age.

I figured that since I was working (Pause) ... because other things that made women to enter into second marriages was that maybe they were not employed and they needed someone to help them with raising the children. So since I was working and I prayed to God to help me raise my child and be able to educate her. And I did, with the kind of salary I was earning (Lerato Modise, Interview 2004).

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<sup>143</sup> Of the women activists interviewed, four were single and five were widowed.

The discussion above shows the different approaches that women adopt in addressing the challenges they face with regard to personal relationships with men. It reflects women's awareness of the power imbalances within female/male relationships and their efforts to subvert the dominant patriarchal ideology. Furthermore, with the changes in women's status in society and more women in the labour force, this has also influenced the options or choices they have in terms of personal relationships with the opposite sex.

### Domestic chores and childcare responsibilities: how do women negotiate these responsibilities?

Child-care and household chores remain the major responsibility of women, whether they are married or single. For many of them, their extended family members (for instance mothers, sisters, cousins or aunts) play a major role in assisting with taking care of their children while they are away on trade union activities.

When I got home, I had someone to help me with the laundry; I was working so I could afford to pay her for washing and ironing my laundry. And I would start cooking. If I am going to attend a union meeting the following day, I would make sure that I prepare everything before I go to bed. In the morning, I make sure that whilst I am preparing to go for the meeting, the pots are on the stove. Before I leave I prepare lunch boxes for my children, that is if I bring them with me to the meetings or I leave them with my mother-in-law. But at least I would have left food ready. If it is Sunday, when I come back from the meeting I would prepare my children for the next day. You always had a programme that would allow you to move around (Maria Masote, Interview 2004).

In our discussion about child-care, Maria Masote emphasised the role played by extended family members. She suggests that:

Sometimes for one to be able to participate in most union activities, your family background is important. In my instance my mother-in-law was very supportive and helpful when it came to the children. ... This helped with my activism because I never had problems with baby-sitting for my children. Even my husband never had problems with taking care of the children because he was aware of my union activities (Maria Masote, Interview 2004).

By relying on the help of family members whilst fully participating in trade union activities, women activists also engage in similar practices as their male counterparts. They also have the opportunity to transfer household and childcare responsibilities to family members.

... It was quite tough, but I had a lot of support from my family, my mother and my mma mogolo (maternal aunt), though we called her mother. At the time both of them were unemployed, so they helped me a lot with my child. And my sisters also assisted with taking care of my child whenever I was away. It was mainly the support from my family that enabled me to be fully active in trade union activities (Lerato Modise, Interview 2004).

Rethabile Mashilo (who has three children aged fourteen, thirteen and eight years old) also has similar support from her family. Since she did not have her driving license at the time of the interview, she lives in Johannesburg where her work is, while her children remained with her parents in Brits, about sixty kilometres from Johannesburg. While she makes every attempt to see them each weekend, sometimes she has to attend to union activities. Mashilo explains that it is always important for her children to understand her work and the reasons she is always away from home. This means that some weekends she brings her children along with her to the trade union meetings. "I think they are beginning to understand what I do" (Interview 2005). Mary Mkhwanazi, who also has two children (ages nine and twenty years old) concedes that "It is a challenge [being a mother and an activist] but you have to make your children understand your job" (Interview 2005).

## Conclusion

This chapter has highlighted the challenges that women often face in fully participating in trade unions. It demonstrates the patriarchal control with which women are confronted within their relationships, and different ways in which women negotiate their independence or freedom to be active in trade unions. The chapter shows that although not all women choose to leave their partner, most of those who remain married continue to pursue their trade union activism despite the disapproval of their husbands. In this way, these women continue to engage in gender struggles within their marriages, and assert the prerogative to follow their own decision to be active in trade unions.



## Gender politics in trade unions: debates on gender equality

### Introduction

The mobilisation of women into trade unions, as shown in earlier chapters, has been influenced largely by the apartheid context of racism and political repression. It has already been demonstrated how the experiences of racism in the workplace influenced solidarity and collective identity amongst workers. The growth of trade unions and their success in the workplace were significant for worker mobilisation and confidence in their solidarity. However, we have also seen that women's workplace experiences were limited not only to racism, but they also experienced gender specific discrimination at work. As a result, solidarity based on traditional working-class interests was not sufficient for mobilising on gender specific interests.

This chapter examines women's struggles for gender equality and representation in the workplace and within the labour movement. It shows how women built on their collective gender solidarity, identifying common experiences of women in the workplace. The chapter further emphasises the central position of collective gender identity and solidarity in women's efforts within the labour movement, and how women utilize it to create spaces for articulating gender inequality and raising gender consciousness amongst women and the broader labour movement. Women's struggles in the workplace and trade unions show that these arenas are gendered, that they have 'two sexes,' and therefore, the politics of the workplace and workers' struggles need to be

redefined to include both sexes. Women's demands therefore are that these arenas, through policies and legislation, need to reflect and promote gender equity in the workplace and within the labour movement itself.

## Hostility towards women as leaders in the unions

As women were at the forefront of efforts to organise employees in the workplace, a number of them were shop stewards and some even occupied positions as general secretary (Emma Mashinini; Maggie Magubane; Thembi Nabe) or were elected presidents (for instance Faith Modise). In the early years of trade unions, organisation was less hierarchical and therefore union positions were less associated with power and influence.<sup>144</sup> However, with the growth and success of the unions in the early 1980s, they gained power and influence in the workplace and the broader liberation struggle. Since these attributes of power and influence did not conform to the dominant stereotypes of women, "there were those who felt that they could not be led by a woman" (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004). Maggie Magubane, who is the founder of Sweet Food and Allied Workers' Union (SFAWU) in the Johannesburg region and was the general secretary in 1975, argues that:

Kwa-Zulu Natal was especially difficult because the male workers felt that you could not do certain things as a woman, that a woman cannot address them. It was more the tradition that 'a woman cannot stand in front of us and tell us what to do'... (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

Magubane was one of the few women in the early years of trade union mobilisation that occupied a position of leadership. She and other women like Thembi Nabe, who held positions of general secretary, were forced to resign from these by hostile male attitudes within their trade union organisations. According to Magubane, as the union grew and expanded its membership countrywide, patriarchal male attitudes surfaced. "There were too many fights ... People from Durban became very arrogant, some of them saying that 'no she cannot be our leader as a woman'" (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004). Magubane eventually stepped down and a man took over from her.

Another example of a woman who was a general secretary from the 1970s is Emma Mashinini. Although she resigned to pursue other interests, her decision

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<sup>144</sup> See Tshoaedi (1999) for detailed discussion on the changes in the trade unions' organisational structure in the early 1980s and how this influenced gender relations, and more importantly women's access to leadership positions.

was also influenced by the power struggles within the labour movement that challenged women's leadership roles (Emma Mashinini, Interview 2005). Veronica Mesatywa cited an example of these power struggles within CCAWUSA at the time of Mashinini.

... When we had our congress in Pietermaritzburg, there were people who wanted to compete for her position. And so male comrades were caucusing against her, wanting her to step down... male comrades did not want to hear a thing ... they were acting in certain ways that would give you the message that you do not belong in the trade unions but in the kitchen. For instance they would disrespect women at congresses. When a woman addressed a congress/meeting they would demand that she sits down, that she was being out of order (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

In explaining what happened within the labour movement and the power struggle that ensued, Mesatywa (Interview 2004) points to the changes that took place in the trade unions with their growth. She suggests that in the early stages of trade union formation, "an elected position was never regarded as a powerful position where one would have a lot of power. It was not seen as a way of moving up the ladder or to greener pastures" (Interview 2004).

The challenge for these women leaders was not only dealing with men in the unions, but employers as well. According to Maggie Magubane, "it was difficult, as a woman, because employers never recognised women as trade unionists" (Interview, 2004). Mashinini adds that "management was reluctant and resisted negotiating with women" (Interview 2005). Women were not perceived as being capable of representing workers on important issues such as wages or working conditions. This research indicates that both employers and the unions did not regard women as the equals of men in the workplace.

The male patriarchal collusion in the workplace was reflected most in collective bargaining issues whereby, on the one hand, unions prioritised wages and working conditions, excluding issues of maternity leave and equal pay for women and men, and on the other hand, employers were willing to negotiate and concede only to non-gender orientated demands. Sex discrimination against women was rarely considered among issues to be included in the working conditions. Thabethe explains below:

For instance when we wanted to raise issues of equal pay for equal work, we were not taken seriously as women. If we were performing the same tasks why should we be paid less? But at that time women were seen as only working for beauty cosmetics and other non-essentials like clothing. While men were working because they had responsibilities; they had families to take care of. Then we had to challenge such perceptions... (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

These sexist views by white employers, and of course African male workers and unionists, demonstrates the ignorance of the changes in the South African society during this period, such as the social dynamics of urban African families whereby more women were single parents or heads of households. Even in those situations in which women were married, African wages were simply not adequate for an African family to survive on one income. According to Elizabeth Thabethe:

... We were taking this struggle as not only about workplace related issues, but we were also having this *woman consciousness* (my own emphasis added), that why can't women organise themselves. Because at the time women were not just staying at home and raising babies, but they had to go to work, they were forced to become workers... There was a demand for us to join the workforce. But when we got into the workplace you discover that it is so male dominated. White males filled every category of management positions. But then also in the unions you found that men were also dominating women. Talking about women's issues it was like a joke, there was no space for addressing women's issues (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

According to the women activists in this study, the domination of and discrimination against women was to be found in all sectors of society. African women experienced sexist attitudes of both white and African men in South African society. Their issues or interests as women in the workplace and in the unions were not fully addressed. While working-class identity was crucial in uniting both African women and men in the mobilisation and organisation of trade unions at their places of work, this identity was not instrumental in mobilising on gender related issues. The common working-class issues articulated within this interest group excluded the collective concerns of women workers.

I have already pointed out that workplace experiences are gendered. As much as African workers suffered from racial discrimination and domination, the gender aspect of these experiences is central. Based on discussions with women activist, indications are that women's experiences of poor wages and poor working conditions are informed by their gender category. "...Issues around maternity leave brought unity amongst ourselves because it affected every one of us ..." (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). In the quote below Magubane illustrates the issues that women were challenging in the workplace:

Another thing that we challenged is that women used to do important jobs in the factory but then when it came to pay they would be underpaid. By important I mean that women used to be more productive in the factory ... the stuff we handled was delicate and women used to handle it well. And even when it came to production, women used to produce more than men. They used to

stick to their work; men would go out very often, like going out for a smoke and so on (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

The context in which women activists made these demands is important. Firstly, the 1980s was a significant period in the mass mobilisation of women into political organisations. The developments in the country in the early 1980s also created favourable conditions for women's gender consciousness. In 1983, the United Democratic Front (UDF) was launched, with the slogan of political mass mobilisation. Women's organisations aligned with the UDF - for instance the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW) that organised in Johannesburg - were formed during this period and were also raising women's issues. Another significant development was the publication of magazines like *Speak* that focused on working-class women's issues in society.

The mass organisation of women into political organisations highlighted the issue of gender inequality within the broader liberation movements as well as the labour movement. The 1980s were a significant period in the debates on the fight against apartheid and the emancipation of women. Within these organisations, women were exposed to developments in neighbouring countries like Zimbabwe and Mozambique where women were also involved in nationalists' struggles, but marginalised when their countries achieved independence.<sup>145</sup>

Secondly, from the mid-1980s the liberation movement also began to emphasise the specific gender oppression of women and the need to fight for gender equality. In 1985 O.R. Tambo,<sup>146</sup> then president of the African National Congress in exile, released a statement acknowledging the importance of the struggle for the emancipation of women. This context placed women's issues and experiences of gender inequality on the agenda of the struggles in the 1980s.

The growth of trade unions in the 1980s and the subsequent launch of COSATU in 1985 opened new opportunities for the labour movement. With their acquired status as the largest federation and representative of the working-class, COSATU gained international recognition. After its launch, COSATU not only

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<sup>145</sup> In highlighting the South African women's organisations' awareness of issues of gender inequality and power relations in the liberation movement in the 1980s, Fester (1997:48) says that "I joined UWO in 1982 and one of the first education forums I attended was on Women in Mozambique." It was in such forums that activists like Fester were made aware of the dangers of nationalist politics that failed to prioritise gendered power relations within the liberation movement.

<sup>146</sup> Tambo is noted as one of the ANC leaders who were sensitive to women's concerns and more willing to listen to women in exile (Hassim, 2006). This could be linked to his experience as a student at the university of Fort Hare in 1941. In his biography (Callinicos (2004:123), Tambo states "I can see quite clearly that if there was a single event that launched me on to the road to ultimate involvement at the heart of South African politics – it was an assault on an African woman by her white employer in a kitchen at Fort Hare." Criticizing the assault, Tambo argues, "She was certainly someone's sister or mother or wife. Did the boarding master think that she was his slave, not a lady entitled to respect, like all other women? Would he have kicked or beaten up his sister or mother or wife? (124).

aligned itself with the liberation movement in exile, but it also built relations with internationally based labour federations, creating opportunities for cooperation and exchange of information. This opened opportunities not only for COSATU, but for women as well, as they were able to share and exchange information on issues of gender inequality with women from these international federations.

## How do women create the space for addressing women's issues?

The success and growth of the trade union movement in the early 1980s, together with the dominant sexist and patriarchal attitudes towards women, reflects the limited extent to which the working-class identity on its own can achieve the interests and concerns of the whole group. The growth of the trade union movement also reveals growing differentiation in the interests and priorities of those organised. As shown in chapter three, opportunities for these divisions arise out of the power gained in the workplace that was reflected through strikes and protests for improved wages and working conditions. The unions' ability to exercise power and influence in the workplace opened opportunities for individuals within the working-class collective to present different interests or concerns. It is during such periods that most women became aware of the shortcomings of working-class identity, and the need to develop a gender identity to mobilise for women workers' interests.

According to Veronica Mesatywa (Interview 2004), women began talking about their experiences in the workplace, the discrimination they suffered and the failure of the unions to address their issues. "... These were informal discussions on our way to work, or during tea breaks or lunch" (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004). Corroborating what Mesatywa says, Patricia Khumalo (Interview 2004) asserts "that made us realise that we couldn't continue claiming to be members of unions when our job security was at stake." She continues:

... We started asking 'who falls pregnant?' ... And one other thing is that many women had to go the route of unsafe abortions so that they could keep their jobs. Maybe at that time our level of consciousness was not so high. But we were saying that ... we are the people targeted by management when it comes to job losses. So we join the union for a range of issues, primarily because we want to secure our jobs. So we had to put maternity leave on the agenda... (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

The expansion of trade unions into female dominated sectors further highlighted the discrimination of women in the workplace, thereby raising women's gender consciousness. Lydia Kompe, who, as mentioned in the earlier chapters, is one of

the founders of Transport and General Workers' Union, explains how her experience of organising in a sector dominated by women who were sexually exploited by bosses, as well as male fellow workers (who were often in supervisory positions), 'empowered' her to raise issues of sexual harassment in the workplace. She explains that:

The general sector empowered me because I went to organise cleaners; it was women and the security guards at the Anglo-American properties and the municipal workers. The women in these sectors empowered me because I started mobilising the women and challenging sexual harassment. We took that up and we formed the forums within FOSATU (predecessor of COSATU) (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

These were practical issues that affected many women. Most women were eager therefore to mobilise and support these demands (Thembi Nabe, Interview 2005).

We mobilised for unity amongst ourselves because most of the men were negotiators since they were in leadership positions ... Issues like maternity leave or those related to women were easily compromised by male workers" (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

It was in this context in the 1980s that leading women activists like Thembi Nabe, Maggie Magubane and Lydia Kompe were already speaking out against gender inequalities in the workplace, society and the labour movement. Informal women's forums were initiated during this period, and through these forums, women questioned the unequal power relations between women and men in the workplace, the unions and the liberation movement, as well as in society as a whole.

Explaining the women's forums, Elizabeth Thabethe explains, "for us to meet as women, it was because of the concerns we had as a group and we felt that it was important to take action if things were to change" (Interview 2004). She continues:

People like Maggie Magubane had been in the unions for a longer period, they were in the forefront of starting the women's forums where we could address the issues affecting women most. We were concerned about the dominance of men in leadership positions. Men dominated unions, even in those unions that were mainly women like in SACCAWU (Commercial and Catering sector) or SACTWU (textile sector) (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

One of the objectives of the women's forums was to increase the number of women activists within the trade unions so as to penetrate the leadership structure of the labour movement. Women activists believed that this would enable women

to influence the decision-making structures, which would be useful in terms of getting women's issues on the agenda of the labour movement.

Having the women's forums within FOSATU (predecessor of COSATU) assisted us in raising such issues because that is where we would discuss such issues as women. We were arguing that we couldn't continue with the situation with men in all the leadership positions (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Raising gender consciousness amongst women workers was the key to achieving their objectives. This involved discussions about the different forms of oppression to which African women are subjected (Rain Chiya, Interview 2004). Challenging the emphasis that has often been placed on apartheid oppression, the forums highlighted the oppression of women by men in various aspects of their lives. For instance, the concept of triple oppression was discussed in these forums (Mesatywa, Interview 2004). This concept linked the battles that women fought at three different levels - as blacks, as women and as part of the working-class.

You know, before we were trying to take away the fear that married women had about being involved in trade union activities. Those times it was relevant to have those structures to try and raise women's consciousness that they were also human beings and not children. Making them understand the issues and the unequal power relations between women and men ... (Alina Rantsolase, Interview 2004).

The discussions within the women's forums ranged from experiences in the workplace, in their private relationships and in the family, to those in their society or communities, including those within the trade union organisations. According to Veronica Mesatywa (Interview 2004), women used to talk about the responsibilities they faced in the household and the refusal of their partners to assist with household chores or childcare.

...And everyone would relate similar stories until we realised that this is common ... Later on we realised that no, why are we supposed to carry such responsibilities? Why can't our men help in the house? Why should everything be always waiting for us? (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

### *The first COSATU women's conference in 1988*

The initial attempts by women to force unions to recognise women's presence in the labour movement and address gender issues were in 1985 with the launch of COSATU. The first of these attempts was during the negotiations for the launch

of COSATU in the early 1980s when women challenged the unions on the drafting of a logo that had images of men only.<sup>147</sup> The COSATU logo that was eventually adopted, after heavy criticisms from many of the women activists, included an image of a woman carrying a baby on her back with one fist raised.

Through the pressure from women activists in the forums, the federation acknowledged the experiences faced by women in the workplace, and committed itself to fighting against all forms of discrimination against women.<sup>148</sup> The launch of COSATU and the acknowledgement of women's rights were crucial in women's campaign for gender equality. It signalled that, in principle, the labour movement 'supported' the movement against gender inequality. However, the liberation struggle and the battle against apartheid workplaces still remained top priority. These contradictions in the labour movement created tensions between male trade unionists and women activists.

The National Education Committee (NEDCOM) was established in 1986 to address the educational needs of COSATU trade unions.<sup>149</sup> NEDCOM held its first conference the following year in 1987. The participation of women in this conference gave them the opportunity to raise the status of women within the labour movement and to make suggestions for a women's conference.<sup>150</sup> With the influence of women activists, the conference noted that although the federation had committed to fighting against the discrimination of women at all sectors of society, including the trade unions, not much progress had been made. The education committee's conference charted the way forward to addressing women's issues within the labour movement, and also giving women a platform on which to raise their issues. The conference recommended that:

A conference or workshop should be convened to discuss the issue of women ... noting that there is very little awareness about the problems facing women and the resolution on women, NEDCOM should distribute publications, pamphlets, stickers, posters and any kind of propaganda to try and build awareness (24).<sup>151</sup>

Stemming from the recommendations made at the NEDCOM conference, women made preparations for their first women's conference to be held in 1988. The main focus of the women's conference was to develop strategies for increasing the number of women active in trade unions, and to lead the way in addressing women's issues within the unions.<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>147</sup> Voicing her disappointment about the proposed logos, Mashinini (1989:118) states "it means that our presence, our efforts, our work, our support was not even recognised."

<sup>148</sup> COSATU Resolutions, 1985 (South African Historical Archives (SAHA) Database AL 2457).

<sup>149</sup> COSATU Education Conference, 1987 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>150</sup> Cosatu Women's Conference 1988 (pp4) (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>151</sup> COSATU Education Conference, 1987 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>152</sup> COSATU Education Conference, 1987 (COSATU House Archives).

The conference brought together women in the trade unions, community women's organisations like the Federation of Transvaal Women (FEDTRAW), Natal Organisation of Women (NOW) and United Women's Organisation ((UWO) based in Cape Town. Women from other African countries such as Namibia,<sup>153</sup> and even local women activists and university intellectuals attended the conference (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2004).

While the conference was useful in bringing women together for the discussion of issues that affected them as a gender group, it also highlighted divisions amongst women in terms of strategies on how to address their problems. "The first conference was a battle since we had different ideas about the women's forums and whether it was necessary" (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). Women were in disagreement about the timing for women's campaign within the labour movement. According to Magubane, "we were fighting; some of the women felt that time was not right for us as women to begin demanding to occupy positions. We were not united and it was tense" (Interview 2004).

Opposition to the formation of women's forums within the unions came largely from women within COSATU who were active in community-based organisations, and also from FEDTRAW, another community-based women's organisation. According to Magubane, "FEDTRAW was also contributing to the divisions, since they were opposed to women's forums within the unions. They wanted women trade unionists to join FEDTRAW (Interview 2004). COSATU women's initiative to form women's forums was perceived as a threat by FEDTRAW women who organised at the community level. "...They feared that COSATU was taking over FEDTRAW's issues..." (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Some of the women unionists who were active in FEDTRAW were challenging the importance of these forums within the labour movement. An illustration of these tensions is highlighted in the report to the COSATU women's seminar in Cape Town by the CCAWUSA Vaal branch in 1989.

The branch has experienced some problems in trying to establish CCAWUSA /COSATU women's groups. Women within the union and even outside the union have opposed these structures arguing that this will compete with FEDTRAW. The conflict even went as far as counter meetings being organised to recruit women from the unions into FEDTRAW. This put women in the middle where they had to choose between the union and FEDTRAW.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> Cosatu Women's Conference, 1988 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>154</sup> CCAWUSA Report to COSATU's Women Seminar, Cape Town 17-19 April 1989 (SAHA Archives).

The debates at the conference were also influenced by the broader discourses within the labour movement. When FOSATU was formed in 1979, the labour federation was confronted by debates over whether unions should focus on workplace issues only, or be involved in community issues as well. There was also a race element in the debates. The unions that were considered populist (community struggles) were mainly African, while those considered workerists (workplace struggles) had a large number of white activists (Researcher's notes).<sup>155</sup> These debates surfaced again at the 1987 national congress when COSATU debated the adoption of the ANC's freedom charter. The women's conference was dominated by these debates and divided along the lines of these political differences.<sup>156</sup> The opposition towards women's forums indicates that these were perceived as workplace based and therefore workerist, since their focus was mainly on women in the workplace, hence the strong opposition from FEDTRAU and COSATU women who were active in community based organisations.

In spite of the conflicts and divisions, the conference made a resolution on establishing women's forums within COSATU unions at the local level. The conference reached a settlement that individual women within COSATU need to be encouraged to be active in women's community organisations. It also resolved to increase cooperation with mass based community organisations through joint campaigns and seminars (33).<sup>157</sup>

The conference also made resolutions on other issues that affected women in the workplace and in the wider society. Resolutions taken by the conference included fighting for equality in the workplace in terms of wages and occupations, maternity and childcare leave, sharing of childcare responsibilities between women and men, women's right to safe, free and legal abortion fighting sexual violence against women and the failure of the police to treat such cases as serious offences. The conference further noted sexual harassment as a problem that affects women at work, in the unions and in their communities, and resolved to fight against this at all levels (15).<sup>158</sup>

The 1988 women's conference should be acknowledged as very significant in boosting women's struggles within the labour movement. It was a historic moment in the liberation battle. For the first time women had a national gathering where the debates focused "specifically into the problems facing women in our organisation and to forge a decisive programme of action."<sup>159</sup> By bringing

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<sup>155</sup> Researcher's notes taken from a discussion with Sakhela Buhlungu who worked in the trade union movement at the time of the conference.

<sup>156</sup> Minutes of COSATU's second national women's conference, August 1992 (COSATU Archives).

<sup>157</sup> COSATU women's conference, April 1988 (COSATU Archives).

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> An address by Chris Seopesengwe at the COSATU Women's Conference in 1988.

women together at a national level, the conference provided a comprehensive overview of the problems faced by women under a patriarchal apartheid society. It allowed women to exchange knowledge and ideas on broader issues of gender inequality.

#### *Establishing women's forums in the unions*

Taking note of the tensions that were highlighted at the 1988 conference, women intensified their drive to popularise women's forums within the unions, and to educate other women about the importance of these structures in the workplace and the unions (Rain Chiya, interview 2004).

Although resolutions to actively promote women's rights within the labour movement and the workplace and to set up women's forums were passed by the COSATU congress and by the women's conference. Getting these structures off the ground in the affiliates was a tough battle for women activists. Women's claims for equality with men were ridiculed and they were often reminded that "... 'A woman's place is in the kitchen'..." In retaliation to this, women "introduced the slogan, 'a woman's place is at the workplace' and later we said 'a woman's place is where she feels comfortable' " (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Most men who were influential in these affiliates were opposed to the women's forums. According to Themba Kgasi "... men who were in key positions felt threatened by the possibility of changes in the status quo ..." (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2004). Women's demands were a threat to the patriarchal establishment in the unions; some male colleagues believed that women were challenging their "... traditionally God given rights..." to dominate women (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

For some of these men, their patriarchal 'rights' of being heads of households or leaders extended to the trade union organisation as well. They still perceived women as inferior and incapable or unsuitable for leadership positions. Women, however, retaliated by questioning men's patriarchal presumptions:

If we are fighting against apartheid, why couldn't we fight against the oppression of women in the workplace? Why should men continue to claim superiority when we could perform similar tasks in the workplace?" (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

In their demands for setting up women's forums in affiliates, women were arguing that:

...We were also workers, we are leaders and we demanded to be recognised, the unions must set up the women's structures ... Women were there in the unions; they were part of the struggle;

they were soldiers: women were shop stewards, and they were at the forefront. How come that when it came to positions of power they were not seen? Women's rights must be recognised, women should be visible in leadership positions. From there we proposed that affiliates should establish women's forums. We had to be persistent for us to be taken serious (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Women did make small inroads in getting the forums established in certain unions. According to Maggie Magubane:

... Affiliates did not see the importance of such structures. But some affiliates supported it, unions like NUMSA, CWIU, TGWU, and NEHAWU. SACTWU did not want to hear a thing about the issue; even today it's difficult with textile (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).<sup>160</sup>

Although the majority of men unionists fiercely opposed the women's forums, there were some who were sympathetic to women's concerns. According to Rain Chiya, women "came up with the suggestion that the General Secretary of COSATU had to intervene ... Jay Naidoo was the secretary at the time and he was gender sensitive. So he agreed to the suggestion ..." (Rain Chiya, Interview 2004).

Women's strategies of building support within the labour movement focused on "...people like Jay Naidoo ... Oliphant was the deputy president; Gomomo and so on... who were in the Central Executive Committee (CEC) of COSATU" (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). According to Themba Kgasi "...we were fortunate to have Chris [Dlamini] and Jay Naidoo in leadership because they listened carefully..." (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2004). Approaching these 'gender sensitive' men, women warned that:

...COSATU couldn't continue being a boys' choir, and that those from the affiliates, CEC must be able to take this resolution... We succeeded because after we influenced them they agreed that there was a need for change within COSATU. They conceded that some of the women are leaders and they have long been in the unions (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

As women were gaining support for their demands, they made calls for the women's forums at the national level. Their demands also included the appointment of a fulltime gender coordinator at the COSATU level. In 1989 COSATU women reviewed the organisation's resolutions on developing female leadership and promoting women's rights within the labour movement.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> SACTWU has more than 80 percent women membership, but men dominate its leadership. The union has consistently opposed the women's structures or any separate organising of women.

<sup>161</sup> COSATU report to the 6<sup>th</sup> ICFTU World Women's Conference, October 1994 (COSATU House Archives).

Although women made demands for a national gender coordinator in 1989, this was only achieved through a congress resolution in 1991. The congress further reaffirmed the importance of women's forums and the need for affiliates to strengthen these forums.<sup>162</sup>

In the trade unions, we laid the foundations, those of us who were in the sub-committee during the 1980s. Even the employment of the gender coordinator we fought for it: it was a battle. We fought, and fought until COSATU agreed to employ a full-time gender coordinator. This was meant to promote women's issues within the unions. We decided to take things step by step. Getting COSATU to agree to employ a full-time gender coordinator was a milestone in our agreement because it meant recognition of the need to engage on gender issues... (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

*'Singasa nibizi dudlu': the sexual harassment debate in COSATU*<sup>163</sup>

In the early 1980s, women raised the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace and demanded that unions take it up with management. There was little resistance from male members or the leadership to the unions taking up this challenge. Sexual harassment of women in the workplace was noted in COSATU's launching congress, and a resolution was passed to challenge such practices. In 1989 at the COSATU congress, women brought up the issue of sexual harassment within the labour movement. Women demanded a resolution on the code of conduct on sexual harassment in the workplace and in the unions. Raising this issue was one of the crucial moments in the history of women's struggles against gender inequality within the labour movement. Jane Barrett of Transport and General Workers' Union (TGWU) led the debate at the conference. She recalls that when she raised the issue:

There was huge hostility, we were relatively a small union and National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) (which is one of the largest unions and had the largest delegation in the conference) just took us on (Jane Barrett, Interview 2004).

The hostility towards this issue has to be seen in the context of the politics within the labour movement at the time. Firstly, Jane Barrett as a white woman was immediately associated with the west and with feminism: at the time of the conference, there was strong antagonism to both. Secondly, the tensions, which still existed, between white intellectuals (who were largely considered workerists) and black male leaders (who largely associated with the populists)

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<sup>162</sup> COSATU 1991 Congress resolutions on women (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>163</sup> 'Must we no longer call you dudlu' (IsiZulu word used in reference to a woman, which has sexual connotations).

influenced the hostility towards the issue, or who was raising the issue. NUM is one of the unions that strongly believed in trade union involvement in community struggles and was highly critical of those who opposed this position.

The demand for a code of conduct on sexual harassment was motivated by women's concerns that it was exploitative and an abuse of power by male leaders. According to Khumalo (interview 2004), male leaders would often have multiple relationships with women who were active in unions. This normally created tensions and fights amongst the cheated women, who would end up withdrawing from the trade unions (Patricia Khumalo, interview 2004). Sibongile Masangwane who was a shop steward with the union (TGWU) that initiated the debate on sexual harassment, explains that:

Our problem with sexual harassment within the labour movement was that it killed the struggle. It was drawing us back as women in the labour movement. It also killed women's dignity. We wanted to maintain women's dignity and to make sure that we maintain all the gains made (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

The issue of sexual harassment in the unions is not only about sex, but also involves power relations and domination over the 'other.' In this instance sexual harassment is being used to reinforce these notions of domination and subordination. In spite of being in leadership positions in the unions, which should give them similar status to their male counterparts, women are still treated as the 'other' that is inferior: women are still regarded as outsiders and therefore not bona fide members of the labour movement (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2004).

There were quite a lot of advances, especially when we went for congresses. At the time we were looked at as objects, though we were shop stewards and leaders. For instance at congresses you would get notes from a male official asking if you could come to his room after the congress (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Interviews with these women activists suggest that sexual harassment, in the context of trade unions, is a tool used by men to keep women outside these organisations. Excluding women from the main activities of trade union organisations ensures that women never have opportunities of accessing powerful or influential positions. According to Joyce Pekani (Interview 2004) "... Men had an agenda of holding us back..." Sibongile Masangwane further explained the frustrations women activists experienced with the issue of sexual harassment:

It was problematic because we would empower women into shop-steward positions and then the men would come and ask them out (on dates). And that had a negative impact on women's

participation in the union, because once the relationship goes sour, women lose interest in union activities. This was a strategy to weaken women who were coming up in leadership positions. This destroyed our women structures because the men would target all those women whom we groomed (Sibongile Masangwane, 2005).

The women's strategies were perceived as a threat by many men unionists who were content with the status quo.

... Most of them felt threatened by our forums. They were arguing that the forums were discussing issues that were even outside the factory floor. Some of the issues we were discussing of course related to how men were behaving and sexual harassment within the unions... (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

Many of the male delegates at conferences perceived sexual harassment as a personal or private matter, and as such inappropriate to be dealt with in the trade union arena. It was felt that the women who raised such matters in the forums and conferences were bringing private matters into the public area. When women raised the issue of sexual harassment in the COSATU national congress 1989, "it was packed, it was in the afternoon and everybody wakened up," (Patricia Khumalo, interview 2004).

It has not been easy raising gender issues within the trade unions because of the politics. When the issue of sexual harassment was tabled, CCAWUSA seconded the motion. I am not sure which union between NUM and NUMSA argued that 'look here; we are talking serious issues here. We are talking about our comrades who had been kidnapped by the regime, we are talking about comrades who have been arrested, and we need to take political decisions here. And we can't be bringing issues of this nature to this congress. There is nothing like sexual harassment' ... It was dismissed like that. It was proposed that the issue be closed... so that the congress can talk about serious political issues (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004).

Between 1984 and 1990 in South Africa is known to be one of the most turbulent periods, with mass political protests which resulted in a number of people being arrested, including trade union leaders. For instance, at the time of the congress the NUMSA general secretary was in detention, and many union leaders had been arrested, some were in hiding and many were experiencing police harassment.

However, the social and political context was also being exploited to suit the interests of some men during the debates. This was a period when the political struggle against apartheid regime and its western supporters, particularly United States and Britain, was very intense. When sexual harassment was raised in the

congress, it was easy to associate the issue with the west in order to raise tensions among the delegates. The African context and culture were manipulated and misrepresented to promote the self-interest of some male delegates at the conference.

The argument was that sexual harassment is a western thing, which did not exist in the African context. In the African context women are appreciated, and there's nothing wrong with that. That was the debate in the congress. And unfortunately our unions never included women in the delegation to the congress, which meant that few women had the opportunity to be part of the congress (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2005).

Some men were asking why women were bringing up the issue of sexual harassment. According to Sibongile Masangwane, "there was a lot of resistance against it. There were questions like 'why'? 'Singasa nibizi dudlu?' 'Are we no longer supposed to touch you?' This became a big issue" (Interview 2007).

The debate not only raised tensions between women and men, but amongst women themselves. Not all women in the unions supported the call for a sexual harassment code. "We were divided, as women, when we approached the federation... some [women] opposed it due to lack of understanding" (Maggie Magubane). The divisions among women, as Magubane points out, were indeed caused by poor understanding of the dynamics of sexual harassment. The women who were raising the issue were mostly middle aged, some married and some widowed. Amongst women, the debate narrowed down to jealousy. Issues of beauty, sexual attractiveness or desirability; being too old or already married became the focus. One of the interviewees explains thus:

Let me tell you something off record, off record. When we raised the issue of sexual harassment, not all women supported it. They either thought that because you looked ugly and unattractive ... or already married... you were jealous. Off record neh (neh is often used to get reassurance or common understanding) (Interview 2005).<sup>164</sup>

Nonetheless, women were persistent and wanted to be heard. "The debate was the longest debate ever in the COSATU congress and there has never been another one like it" (Jane Barrett, Interview 2004). This was further supported by Masangwane who argues that:

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<sup>164</sup> This was the third interview with the respondent. And the researcher had previously explained how the information would be presented in the thesis. It was based on this understanding that the respondent made the request that the quote be not directly attributed. This demonstrates the respondent's trust that the researcher would honour her request.

It was heavily debated and it was the longest debate in the congress. And we as TGWU were insisting on the issue until some of the unions in the congress understood our argument and supported us. CWIU and NUMSA joined us in the debate, but the votes went against us (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2005).

The divisions amongst women and the dominance of male delegates who opposed the proposal for a resolution on sexual harassment resulted in the rejection of the resolution by the congress. In spite of this setback, women activists achieved the public space to debate an issue that was specifically about them. For the first time in the history of the labour movement delegates spent hours debating sexual harassment and how it affected women. This was a positive result for women, and it was a victory in their fight for public space: “they began to realise that we could speak up for ourselves” (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2004). When asked whether they were disappointed by the opposition of male delegates to the issue, Sibongile Masangwane explained that “we were satisfied that this was being debated and we were making our point to the congress and stood firm on that. ...We felt that we were making our presence felt” (Interview 2005).

The strength of women in the debate is also reflected in the fact that the congress referred it to affiliates for further discussion “with a view to incorporating issues of sexual conduct into the COSATU code of conduct.”<sup>165</sup> After the congress, women activists ensured that they mobilised more support for their demand for a sexual harassment code. They targeted those affiliates that had supported them at the congress and clarified their position to those who had not understood it. The gender forums were also important in publicising the issue of sexual harassment and educating women (Themba Kgasi, Elizabeth Thabethe and Sibongile Masangwane; interviews 2004 and 2005 respectively).

In 1994 the congress adopted a code of conduct on sexual harassment. This came after allegations of serious misconduct on the part of some delegates at the same congress.<sup>166</sup> This was followed by the establishment of Sexual Harassment Education Programme (SHEP) in 1994, with the aim of assisting the unions in addressing the problems.<sup>167</sup> SHEP provides training workshops and seminars on sexual harassment, and also assists in handling cases of sexual harassment in the workplace and in the unions. In May 1995 the COSATU’s Central Executive Committee passed a code of conduct on sexual harassment proposed by the National Women’s Subcommittee.

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<sup>165</sup> COSATU 1989 Congress resolutions on women (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>166</sup> Shopsteward (1995:55). And also see COSATU 1994 Congress resolutions on women (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>167</sup> Patricia Khumalo was appointed to head the programme and at the time of the interview she was still heading it.

## Women's fight to access key leadership positions

Since COSATU made formal commitments to fighting against gender inequalities and building women's leadership within the labour movement, women used this to hold the labour movement accountable for the empowerment of women as leaders. After the 1988 conference, which concluded that since the launch of COSATU in 1985, there was no progress in terms of women accessing leadership positions, women started demanding measures be put in place. In 1989 at the COSATU national congress, women activists proposed that the congress should take measures to address the inequities in leadership positions.<sup>168</sup>

They argued for the need to create an environment more favourable to women's active participation in trade union activities and access to leadership positions. Women unionists further demanded childcare facilities to be provided by the unions during meetings, that meetings be held at times convenient for women, the provision of transport for late night meetings, and for the unions to take responsibility in propagating the idea of sharing household tasks.<sup>169</sup> To address inequities in accessing leadership positions, women further demanded affirmative action policies to be adopted by the federation and the unions.

As expected, the call for affirmative action did not go unchallenged by some male delegates who believed that women were not capable of being leaders. Unions like Food and Allied Workers' Union (FAWU, which has considerable female membership) and South African Railway and Harbour Workers' Union (SARHWU)<sup>170</sup> strongly opposed the adoption of affirmative action policies. Nevertheless, the congress adopted the resolution and committed itself to "actively encourage the election of women shop stewards on the factory floor and to consciously attempt to ensure that women are elected into leadership at all levels of our affiliates and the federation."<sup>171</sup>

Four years after the resolution was adopted women's national meetings continued to note lack of progress in implementation of congress resolutions on the advancement of gender equality within the labour movement.<sup>172</sup> In 1993, only two of the COSATU regional office holders were women and the national leadership was all male.<sup>173</sup> The situation was not much different at affiliate levels (three worker office holders for SACTWU; two worker office holders for

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<sup>168</sup> Baskin (1989:375) and COSATU congress resolutions on women, 1989 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> SARHWU later merged with TGWU and they are now called SATAWU.

<sup>171</sup> COSATU congress resolutions on women, 1989 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>172</sup> Minutes of the National Women's Committee meeting (3-5 September 1993) COSATU House Archives).

<sup>173</sup> Ibid, (pp11).

SACCAWU and one worker office holder for NEHAWU).<sup>174</sup> In explaining the lack of implementation of COSATU resolutions on promoting gender equality Alina Rantsolase points out that:

COSATU has very good policies, but implementation is a big problem. Because you go to COSATU and say whatever you want as a woman, then when you go back to your affiliate it's a different thing. If you... do not have support, you can't win it. You can have good resolutions in COSATU but if it did not come from an affiliate, if an affiliate did not support it, then implementing that will be a problem within that particular affiliate (Alina Rantsolase, Interview 2004).

Rantsolase highlights the challenges faced by women activists within their affiliate unions in terms of convincing the leadership on the adoption of gender equity policies and implementation of such policies. Her argument also indicates that the adoption of policies at the COSATU national congresses is fruitless without changing male sexist attitudes that dominate key decision-making structures. It also brings to the fore the failure of the federation to have in place effective systems for monitoring progress on gender equity policies, and for making affiliates and leadership accountable.

Coincidentally, in the same year that women noted the lack of progress on women leadership, Connie September from the textile union (SACTWU) became the first woman national office holder after her election as COSATU's second vice deputy president. This was a success in women's battle for accessing key decision-making structures of the labour movement. SACTWU is one of the unions that have consistently opposed women organizing separately within the unions. On the one hand, September's election was a key development in women's fight for gender equality in the labour movement, but on the other hand, men used this achievement in their arguments against the quota system.

Evidence indicates that within the women's committees or meetings discussions on the need for the adoption of a quota system had been taking place since 1989.<sup>175</sup> Women raised the demand for a quota system at the national congresses in 1991 and in 1994, without much success or engagement of the issue at either congress. For most of the early 1990s, women were also campaigning for support within their own affiliates and COSATU.<sup>176</sup> According

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<sup>174</sup> These figures were presented at the women's meeting by representatives from the unions concerned (pp11).

<sup>175</sup> COSATU national women's seminar, March 1989 (cited in 'Women's File' pp14) (COSATU Archives).

<sup>176</sup> Minutes of the National Women's Committee meeting (3-5 September 1993); <sup>176</sup> COSATU gender coordinators' workshop, August 1994 (collected from COSATU House Archives).

to Faith Modise (Interview 2004), “from the early 1990s ...the struggle was continuing for us as women.”

But we were more concerned that women should be able to access leadership positions within the unions...We also aimed for general secretary positions. When we had the congress where Vavi was elected the general secretary, we were aiming to push for Dorothy Mokgalo to be the deputy. Unfortunately she passed away before the congress (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).<sup>177</sup>

By 1996 women leadership in COSATU affiliates was estimated at fifteen percent for regional positions and eight percent of national leadership.<sup>178</sup> Critical of the scarcity of women in COSATU’s core leadership structures, the September Commission<sup>179</sup> chaired by Connie September chastised COSATU and its double standards on women leadership and affirmative action policies.<sup>180</sup>

The contradictions in the labour movement’s fight are reflected in their principles of socialism and collectivism. On the one hand, the labour movement promotes socialist principles of collective struggles and achievements against racial and capitalist oppression, while on the other hand it raises arguments of individualism and merit when it comes to issues of women and gender equity: this is contrary to the principles of socialism, and characteristic of liberal and capitalist views that the labour movement fiercely opposes.

Based on its assessment of lack of implementation of the progressive resolutions taken at every COSATU congress on gender equity, the Commission made recommendations for a fifty percent quota system to be adopted by the federation and its affiliates. This recommendation was discussed at the 1997 national congress of COSATU. It was another heated debate where the focus was on gender equity within the labour movement.

Advocating the quota, women argued that in order to address the structural inequalities and barriers that impacted on women’s development within the labour movement, measures like the quota system had to be implemented. This was similar to the arguments they have been making since 1985, demanding a change to the status quo in trade union leadership, particularly at the senior levels. In this debate, women had the support of unions like CWIU, NEHAWU (National Health and Allied Workers Union),<sup>181</sup> SARHWU and South African

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<sup>177</sup> These nominations were made during the COSATU gender coordinators’ workshop in 1994 (Minutes of the coordinators’ meeting, COSATU Archives).

<sup>178</sup> September Commission Report, (1997:156).

<sup>179</sup> The September Commission was set up in 1996 in preparation for the COSATU congress in 1997. According to Buhlungu (undated:pp27) the commission was asked to investigate and recommend strategies for the future of the federation and its affiliates.

<sup>180</sup> September Commission Report.

<sup>181</sup> NEHAWU was established in 1987. Since it organises mainly within the health sector (largely nursing) it is dominantly female.

Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU). However, this was not sufficient as the largest unions in the federation, the National Union of Metal Workers of South Africa (NUMSA) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) as well as other unions like Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) and the SACTWU opposed the quota. Opposition to the quota system was based on the grounds that women were not tokens, and that the quota system amounted to window dressing (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2004). According to the opposition, the quota system compromised the well-established democratic principles wherein individuals are elected into leadership positions on the basis of merit.

The positions in the debate were presented in terms of mandates from the different affiliates. These had already been discussed in affiliate structures and from there the mandates were developed. When asked about the conference, Rosa Mkhize from NUMSA, who was one of the opposition speakers on the debate, argued as follows:

... We could not understand the fifty/fifty representation because it did not make sense to elect women into positions if they are not capable. We did not agree that we should have three men and three women for the sake of balancing the ratios. With NUMSA we believed that people should move up into leadership positions through the organisational structures ... (Rosa Mkhize, Interview 2005).<sup>182</sup>

This was the same position that SACTWU adopted in its opposition to the quota system. When asked about the congress and her position on the quota debate, Faith Modise's initial response was:

Our union encourages the participation of women... But we do not agree that women should just be placed there because of their gender... Our union was very much opposed to that. We were arguing that women need to be trained and educated so that when they take up positions, they would be ready for that. So we cannot just take women because they are women, and when they get into those positions then they are unable to perform. We do not want people for window dressing; we want women who are active in the union to be in those positions. They have to be trained... Because when women get into those positions and they are incapable, men come back to us and say 'we told you so'. Women are still shy and reserved, and therefore need to be exposed (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

Modise was subsequently asked whether she, as someone who had been in trade unions for a long period and has gained experience over that period, needed

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<sup>182</sup> Mkhize's response fails to take into account earlier comments on the challenges that women shop stewards face in the trade unions in terms of being undermined by male colleagues and being reminded that they are women and therefore not suitable for leadership positions.

training before she could occupy any leadership position. Her response was as follows:

Let me say me as a person I was against the union policy. But when you are attending a congress and you are given a mandate by the union, you have to present the union's position. Personally I believe that women are capable, if she is put in a position she can be trained while in that position (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

Modise's response illustrates the limitations placed on women by the system of mandates. This system restricts the extent to which women can speak out on gender issues. Modise's explanation also shows how the system of mandates operates to exclude minority groups within the collective.

This was discussed at the National Executive Committee (NEC). But the problem was that it was dominated by men. So when we advocated for the quota system, it was crushed easily because women were in the minority. I would come with a position from the COSATU women's forum, based on our discussions on promoting women within the organisation. But because the organisation was dominated by men, the suggestion was opposed. They argued that 'it is not that we are totally opposed to the idea of women being in leadership positions, but we want women to be trained and prepared for a leadership position.' So when I attended the congress, I was carrying the mandate from the union. You cannot change the mandate from the union (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

This underscores the weaknesses of COSATU's democratic processes in protecting the interests of minorities within their organisation. The interviews further highlight the manipulation of power by the dominant groups in these meetings, and how they use their dominance in public spaces for open debates to further their collective interests. Reports of the congress indicate that this was the only issue on which affiliates in the opposing camps allowed women to present the union position, while in those unions that supported the quota, male delegates presented the union position.<sup>183</sup> Themba Kgasi (Interview 2004) who was a gender coordinator for the Paper, Print, Wood and Allied Workers Union (PPWAWU) at the time of the conference made a similar observation in her union. She voiced her frustration about the issue of mandates and representing union policies during the debates. As the PPWAWU official, she was bound by the union policy of mandates not to advocate for the quota system. She remarks that:

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<sup>183</sup> The Shopsteward (1997). Vol 6, No 5. (Resolutions on gender, pp55) (COSATU House Archives).

The men who were in leadership wrote on paper and passed on to women to go and present the union's position. When I tried to oppose that, I was told to remain quiet because I was an official and that the union was led by workers and not officials. That woman stood up in the congress and argued that we as the PPWAWU we do not support the quota. The Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) proposed the quota system, NUMSA stood up and opposed the quota, NUM stood up and opposed the quota and the quota was lost in that way. And during that period... we had mobilised as a gender structure (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2005).

The quota system was not endorsed by the congress. It was suggested that affiliates should continue the discussions and come up with measurable targets. The congress, however, committed itself to "develop a programme on building women's leadership within a broad political programme, with measurable targets to be finalized by the COSATU Central Executive Committee" (57).<sup>184</sup> It is based on this conclusion that the national gender coordinator for COSATU argues "I don't think it's correct to say that they have rejected it, they rather proposed more flexible options so that the quota is not binding" (Mummy Jafta, Interview 2005).

Most women interviewed in the research however, did not share this optimistic sentiment. In discussions with women about the quota debate and their efforts to have more women in key positions of the labour movement, there was a sense of frustration with the developments and the slow progress in the unions. "We tried, we tried I'm telling you to our level best. It was rejected by affiliates and even COSATU" (Appolis, Interview 2007). According to Appolis, since the 1990s it has become acceptable to talk about gender equality and the need to change the male image of the labour federation. This is acceptable, since it does not threaten the power relations within the unions or the federation. She argues further:

Everybody talks about it (gender equality) ... But for me, when it comes to challenging power you will see how people backtrack quickly. You may put gender issues forward as long as it does not challenge power, you can control what women are doing. So eventually you see that we don't have a woman general secretary because it's not just a position but it's a position of power. That's why I am saying that so long as you don't challenge the power relations it's ok (Patricia Appolis, Interview 2007).

Opponents in the quota system debates at the congress failed to focus on the fact that the labour movement and everyone in it are products of a patriarchal society that has always favoured men and given them the advantage over women. The emphasis on merit or individual achievements fails to acknowledge the cultural

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<sup>184</sup> The Shopsteward (1997), Vol 6, No 5 (Resolutions on gender, pp55-68) (COSATU House Archives).

biases or prejudices against women in such societies. As with racially based societies such as that under apartheid, patriarchy imposes different levels of value on women and men, with the latter being placed at the top. In these contexts, capacity or having adequate experience/education often is not necessarily the key factor in determining access to leadership positions.

*Going back to the drawing board: refining the strategies*

In spite of the challenges presented above, women trade unionists did not give up on their demand for a quota system in the unions. Women have consistently used gender forums to garner support within the labour movement for measures to be put in place to address the inequalities observed in the leadership structures of the labour movement. In an interview with the SACCAWU's gender coordinator, Patricia Appolis, points out that after the rejection of the quota in 1997, women continued to present other measures that would facilitate women's access to the decision-making structures of the labour movement. She suggests that:

Some unions adopted other forms of representation; the CWIU at that time had some form of proportional representation or something. They had a whole range of compromises at conferences, things like measurable targets because people did not want the quota. Then we came up with looking at a range of options open to the affiliates ... you don't just say we want a quota and when it's rejected you leave it at that. You negotiate and ... we've said that they must try and work on a gender balance ... (Patricia Appolis, Interview 2007).

After the 1997 congress affiliate gender coordinators investigated strategies that have been implemented by other international labour federations. As a result, in 1999 they developed a proposal for measures to be adopted by the labour movement to address access to leadership positions for women.<sup>185</sup>

This proposal was circulated at the March 1999 CEC with the agreement that affiliates will start discussing in their constitutional structures the guidelines outlined and report back to the Special National Congress in September 1999.<sup>186</sup>

The guidelines were tabled at the congress, and emphasis was placed on implementation so as to address the difficulties that the movement is facing in increasing women's access to leadership positions. The chief objective of these guidelines is to increase the participation of women in constitutional and decision-making structures of the labour movement. The guidelines include the

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<sup>185</sup> National Gender Coordinators' Report to the 4<sup>th</sup> National Gender Conference, 2000 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>186</sup> Ibid (pp2).

ex-officio positions on constitutional structures, portfolio positions, reserved seats for women, deputy secretary position at regional and local levels, quota system (with affiliates determining the ratios),<sup>187</sup> proportional representation and representation of sector coordinators on constitutional structures (2-4).<sup>188</sup>

The congress endorsed the measures without prescribing to affiliates how it should be achieved or suggesting any time lines. In essence, the congress still did not adopt the quota system, but left it to the affiliates to decide. According to some of the gender coordinators from the different affiliates interviewed in this research, this position is not so different from the previous resolutions that have been adopted by COSATU (Leah Marumo, Interview 2007).

The idea of introducing several measures to be followed by affiliates is an attempt by women to lobby support from affiliates to address the issue of female leadership. According to Appolis and Marumo, SATAWU's gender coordinator, the quota system is difficult to achieve within COSATU. There is substantial opposition to the quota since it is a challenge to positions of power. Appolis argues further, "people in positions of power are reluctant to raise the issue because you are talking about people's jobs. It means that people will have to be taken out" (Appolis, Interview 2007).<sup>189</sup>

Paradoxically, in the 2003 national congress COSATU, as a federation, adopted the quota system in its own structures. The quotas were set at fifty percent, and it was supposed to have been implemented by 2006.<sup>190</sup> The big question with this policy is how the COSATU quota system can be achieved without the cooperation of the affiliates. "COSATU structures are made up of affiliates. Women have to come through the affiliates" (Leah Marumo, Interview 2007). For women to get into the COSATU leadership posts they have to be nominated by their own affiliate unions, and these do not have clear policies on gender equity.

Although women activists' struggles for gender equity within the labour movement have been met by strong opposition from some of the sexist male unionists, progress in women's campaigns is observable in the concessions made by the labour movement's adoption of policies aimed at redressing inequalities. In the current context in which public discourses focus on equality and gender

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<sup>187</sup> By 1999 some affiliates like NEHAWU (50 percent), SATAWU (20 percent), CEPPWAWU (25 percent) and SAMWU (30 percent) had already adopted quotas. NUMSA adopted a 25 percent quota in 2004.

<sup>188</sup> National Gender Coordinators' Report to the 4<sup>th</sup> National Gender Conference, 2000 (COSATU House Archives).

<sup>189</sup> This issue of jobs and positions of power is an interesting development within COSATU unions. Since democratisation, union positions within COSATU have become heavily contested because of the lucrative opportunities that these positions present for individuals. In the last three national government elections a number of trade union officials were appointed into government positions.

<sup>190</sup> The interviews conducted in 2007 revealed that implementation of this resolution (like many other COSATU resolutions on the empowerment of women) had not taken place.

equity, organisations like COSATU that have political credentials of fighting against discrimination and injustices are compelled to adopt policy positions that are socially just. Such a context therefore is positive for women activists as it presents further opportunities.

## How have the changes in the political and economic context influenced women's struggles within COSATU?

The changes in the socio-political context from the 1990s to the current period have been central in influencing gender debates within the labour movement. The discourse during this period focused mainly on democracy and equal rights for all. With the democratisation of the country, COSATU women activists had a huge window of opportunity. Unlike the apartheid period when the regime promoted sexism and inequality, the democratic government advocates a discourse of equality and the empowerment of women in all sectors of society. This has also been observed by Seboni (Interview 2005) who believes that these changes are having a positive impact on "people's attitudes" towards women.

But the changes that we've been seeing in the country have had a significant impact in people's attitudes on women's leadership capacity. The president of the country has appointed women into key and significant positions and they are doing remarkably well. So this has had a positive influence on women because they can see women in leadership positions. And even in my union, I intend to see myself as the union president one of these days (Violet Seboni, Interview 2005).

Another key development in women's struggles within COSATU has been the establishment of a gender department within National Labour and Economic Development Institute (NALEDI).<sup>191</sup> This department conducts research on issues of gender inequality and under-representation of women within COSATU and its affiliates. This gender department has been instrumental in advising and assisting women to formulate strategies for challenging gender inequities within the labour movement.

Furthermore it is also important to consider the impact of the current economic challenges on the balance of power within the labour movement. With the democratisation of the country and globalisation, over the years there has been a decline in employment in male dominated sectors like construction, mining and manufacturing.<sup>192</sup> These developments have severely affected membership of the unions concerned. For instance, the 2003 labour force survey shows significantly

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<sup>191</sup> NALEDI was established in 1993 to conduct research for COSATU and its affiliates, as well as to assist the labour movement in policy analysis and interpretation (see Buhlungu, Undated).

<sup>192</sup> See Borat, H and Hodge, J. (1999).

higher rates of union membership in female dominated sectors such as the wholesale and retail, and community, social and personal services sectors, compared to the mining and quarrying industries. In the previous COSATU congresses, strong unions like NUMSA and NUM and other male dominated unions have used their dominant position in the congress to veto women's proposals for gender equity. However, the changes in the economy and the membership structure of the unions are threatening the monopoly of these unions within the federation.

Equally importantly, the government's commitment to gender equity has also resulted in more women being employed in public service occupations. These developments are reflected in women's membership in unions that largely organise in the civil service sector. These unions include NEHAWU (fifty four percent women membership);<sup>193</sup> SAMWU (forty-one percent women membership); SADTU (fifty three percent women membership) and in particular POPCRU (fifty percent women membership). Women's union membership in POPCRU is a significant change from the pre-democracy era, as the police service was dominantly male because of the apartheid policies.<sup>194</sup>

While in 1992 Baskin estimated COSATU female membership to be thirty-six percent, a recent survey estimates COSATU female membership at forty-seven percent.<sup>195</sup> This is a significant change as it means that almost half of COSATU's membership is composed of women workers. And as already suggested, this shift has implications for the struggles on gender equality and leadership structure of the labour movement.

## Conclusion

This chapter demonstrates the emergence of collective solidarity among women trade unionists, and the significance of their gender identity in challenging gender inequality within the labour movement. Their awareness of their common experiences of sexism and gender discrimination not only in the workplace, but also in the union movement is central in the development of their gender consciousness. The creation of 'safe havens' or women's forums is fundamental in women's mobilisation and strategies for challenging gender inequality. Women's forums or gender structures have been effective in making inroads into the public spaces within the labour movement and introducing gender category in the debates.

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<sup>193</sup> In 2005 NEHAWU elected Noluthando Sibiyi as president.

<sup>194</sup> These figures are taken from the National Labour and Economic Development Institute's (2006) Workers' Survey for COSATU.

<sup>195</sup> National Labour and Economic Development Institute (2005). The Workers' Survey for COSATU.

Women activists' demands for equality in the unions are also facilitated by different political opportunity structures, and this is clearly illustrated in the chapter. For instance, the first COSATU congress in 1985 was significant in terms of uniting the working-class and creating a sense of inclusiveness. This was a window of opportunity for women to raise issues of gender equality. The inclusion of gender equality in COSATU's first constitution has been fundamental in women's frame mobilisation and demands for gender equality. The constitution and resolutions of the congress have been used as reference points by gender activists within the unions.

This chapter also illustrates that opportunities are not only related to the developments within the labour movement, but outside it as well. The changes in the attitude of the liberation movement on gender oppression and discrimination as an important aspect of the struggle against apartheid, certainly impacted on the politics of the labour movement. The mobilisation frame of women's issues within the unions in the late 1980s and 1990s was largely influenced by the political discourse and the language of the broader political community that focused on equal rights, democracy and redressing gender inequities. Demands for affirmative action and the quota system were articulated within this context. The post-apartheid developments on gender equity certainly do have an impact on women's struggles for access to leadership and attempts to change the image of the South African labour movement.



## COSATU women and the politics of transition

### Introduction

Compared to other African countries, as well as Latin America and Eastern Europe, the South African transition and democratisation process is one of the most successful in terms of women's rights. Unlike other countries where women's gains in gender equity rights were limited, in the South African context these were enshrined in the Constitution. This guaranteed protection against gender discrimination and also the promotion of women's rights within various sectors of society and government institutions.

This has sparked wide interest amongst women scholars and various analyses have been made to explain this success.<sup>196</sup> These analyses are based largely on women's organisation outside the labour movement (for instance FEDTRAW; NOW; UWO and the ANCWL). Although the struggles by women in the trade unions have been incorporated in some of these discussions, their role and impact on the transition process and the Women's National Coalition (WNC) has not been studied in detail. The neglect of the role of the labour movement in the WNC minimises the contributions made by women in the trade unions in terms of influencing the gender content of the Constitution of South Africa.

These scholars have neglected to question the extent to which women's struggles within trade union male dominated organisations challenged patriarchal

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<sup>196</sup> See Waylen (2007a; 2007b; 1994). Hassim (2006); Mentjies (1998); Seidman (1993 and 1999); Cock (1997).

practices. This failure has also resulted in an oversight in understanding the degree to which women's campaigns and demands within trade unions sought to transform gender relations in society as a whole. Some of these analysts believe that gender struggles and feminist oriented demands emerged as significant in the early 1990s.<sup>197</sup> The assumptions made are that demands for gender equality, and therefore feminist demands, resulted chiefly from the WNC process and women returning from exile largely influenced this development.<sup>198</sup>

This chapter builds on the evidence that has already been presented in this thesis and challenges the notions that "no historical feminist tradition exists in South Africa."<sup>199</sup> I have already shown in chapter one that, contrary to the conclusions of some analysts on women's struggles, South African women's rejection of feminism and its ideals during the apartheid era did not necessarily translate into conformity or submission to patriarchal supremacy. In chapter seven I demonstrated women's struggles to access to the public space for representation of gender issues and challenges for the right to leadership positions. In this chapter, I highlight how this tradition of activism and battles against gender inequality is carried forward into the transition period. To demonstrate this, I will first discuss the various strategies in which women engaged in the 1990s as part of preparations for the constitutional negotiations. The struggles of COSATU women throughout the apartheid era and during the transition period are central in understanding how working-class women impacted on the outcomes of the transition process and the constitution.

The second part of this chapter examines the re-organisation of the women's movement during the 1990s and COSATU's fight to retain its autonomy. Withstanding pressure from the dominant ANCWL for the disbandment of women's organisations, COSATU insisted on retaining its women's structures and participated in the WNC as a representative of working-class women. In this section, I discuss the rivalries for power and control over the transition process from COSATU women's perspective. I demonstrate the contest over centralising of power and influence over the transition process amongst women, and COSATU women's continued struggles for access to the public space and representation of the working-class issues.

Even though COSATU women had experience of participation in organised politics and its challenges, the WNC differed from the working-class organisation. Unlike the labour movement, which is organised on the basis of

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<sup>197</sup> See for instance Cock (1997); Seidman, (1999).

<sup>198</sup> In her analysis of women's organisation in South Africa (which has a brief mention of women in the labour movement), Hassim (2006) however notes that "even though feminism as a term was deemed problematic, a distinctive "South African feminism" was indeed emerging during the 1980s" (76).

<sup>199</sup> Cock (1997: 320).

common working-class identity, the WNC consisted of women from different class backgrounds, organisations and political parties (with fundamentally different ideologies) as well as racial groups. These differences are central to the challenges that COSATU women faced during their participation within the WNC, and these are clearly demonstrated during the process of drafting the Women's Charter. Lastly, I will discuss the outcomes of the WNC and the impact that COSATU made on the Women's Charter process. I will also examine the extent to which the Women's Charter accommodates the interests of working-class women and issues of racial inequality within women.

## COSATU women's organisation prior to the WNC

The period of the 1990s was characterised by major changes in the political context. The new political context required new approaches and strategies in terms of participation in the political process, and in determining the political future of the country. It was on this basis that in January 1990 the exiled ANCWL organised the Malibongwe women's conference in Amsterdam, in the Netherlands that was attended by locally based South African women in the trade unions as well as women's community organisations. The theme of the conference "women united for a democratic South Africa"<sup>200</sup> centred on unity and non-racialism in fighting against gender inequalities in a future democratised South Africa. Discussions about the formation of a national women's movement for effective involvement in the transition process were raised at this forum. According to Sibongile Masangwane, who was one of COSATU delegates to the conference:

... When we attended the Malibongwe women's conference in 1990 in Amsterdam, this (the WNC) was discussed. The conference resolved that we should form a women's movement when we get home. It was one of the resolutions taken at the Malibongwe conference (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

So when COSATU women delegation came back from the Malibongwe conference, the message they brought back was that the struggle should not be left in the hands of men, women needed to participate" (Themba Kgasi, Interview 2005).

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<sup>200</sup> Malibongwe Conference on Women's Struggle in South Africa, Amsterdam 6<sup>th</sup> - 18<sup>th</sup> January 1990 (COSATU Archives).

According to Mathapelo Makgoba,<sup>201</sup> (Interview 2005), the Malibongwe conference made COSATU women assess critically their women's structures and their gender programmes. This also involved a critical assessment of their role as working-class women during the transition phase and in a future democratic South Africa. Women therefore were re-evaluating their gender programmes within the trade unions and strengthening the organisation and mobilisation of working-class women (Mathapelo Makgoba, Interview 2005). The gender programmes or activities within the unions were aligned with the political changes and the dominant political discourses. Framing women's demands in terms of democracy and equal rights, gender activists mobilised women to make demands for gender equality. This frame was also used to draw connections between democracy and rights for gender equality.

Women activists within COSATU relied on various strategies to strengthen their position within the new political context and to raise consciousness amongst working-class women. This involved engaging in broad based campaigns against the Labour Relations Amendment Act Campaign in 1990, which threatened to curtail workers' rights in the workplace;<sup>202</sup> and a march against Value Added Tax in November 1991, which linked women's financial responsibilities in the household with the impact of the introduction of the tax system. By explaining the impact of the proposed government legislation on the household, the labour movement attempted to motivate women to be involved in the broader struggle against the apartheid regime.<sup>203</sup>

The third opportunity that trade union women used to position themselves strategically during the transition period was the workers' charter campaign, which began in 1990 within the labour movement. The workers' charter campaign was adopted as a resolution at the 1989 COSATU congress.<sup>204</sup> The objectives of the campaign were to identify and collate workers' demands through workshops and discussions in affiliate and COSATU structures.<sup>205</sup> Not letting this opportunity pass them by, women activists discussed the charter during women's workshops and in the gender structures within the labour movement in preparation for the workers' charter national conference.<sup>206</sup> At this

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<sup>201</sup> At the time of the transition process, she was secretary to Jay Naidoo who was the Secretary General of COSATU. Makgoba was active in COSATU's women's structures and was appointed one of the delegates to the Women's National Coalition. She also represented COSATU women in the steering committee of the coalition.

<sup>202</sup> In April 1990 women organised a protest march against the then proposed Labour Relations Amendment Act. The march, which was organised by leading women activists, was aimed at taking women "out of the kitchen" and into their "rightful" place in trade union struggles and the broader political struggles affecting their communities (Speak Magazine 1990, No.29).

<sup>203</sup> 'Calling all women' (Pamphlet collected at SAHA Archives).

<sup>204</sup> COSATU second National Women's Conference, 6<sup>th</sup> –8<sup>th</sup> August 1992 (COSATU Archives).

<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid.

conference in November 1990, women challenged the content of the demands made in the Workers' Charter, which excluded the rights and demands of women workers. They insisted on a commission on women workers' rights, something that was initially opposed by male delegates. "This commission came up with a range of demands which were agreed to by the conference" (88).<sup>207</sup> According to one gender activist quoted by Speak Magazine:

The first draft of the questionnaire had three lines on women. Now two sections have been added and it is not only women discussing these rights. Men and women in COSATU are discussing women's rights in talks on the Workers' Charter (6).<sup>208</sup>

The revised draft of the Workers' Charter included women's call for a family code, advocating gender equality laws within the domestic sphere or private relations. Through the family code, women demanded further that the state should take responsibility for childcare through provision of childcare facilities and adequate paternity and maternity leave.<sup>209</sup> Their demands also included protection from and tougher laws against rape, battery and abuse of women, the legalisation of abortion on demand and the recognition of gay rights.

Women also made demands for equal access to labour markets and employment opportunities, equal opportunities to education and training not only in the workplace, but also for schoolgirls; affirmative action laws and laws against all forms of gender discrimination were also included. Reporting back to the national women's conference in 1992, the commission on workers' rights described the following:

Workers' Charter will be a manifesto setting out all the long and short-term demands of workers... The Worker Charter will set out our demands, which we want included in the law, and the constitution of a democratic South Africa. The demands of women workers are an important part of the Workers' Charter.<sup>210</sup>

COSATU women's awareness of the centrality of mobilizing and organizing women to participate in the democratisation process in South Africa was not only influenced by the Malibongwe conference: their experiences within the male dominated labour movement are also fundamental in raising their awareness. COSATU women's experiences and struggles within the labour movement exposed them to the politics of male domination and marginalisation of women's

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<sup>207</sup> COSATU second National Women's Conference, 6<sup>th</sup> –8<sup>th</sup> August 1992 (COSATU Archives).

<sup>208</sup> Speak Magazine 1990, No.29.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

<sup>210</sup> Minutes of COSATU's second National Women's Conference, held at Nasrec, Johannesburg, 7-9 August 1992 (SAHA Archives).

interest in workplace politics. These experiences taught them valuable lessons about the imperatives of organising and mobilising on gender specific interests. Their record within the labour movement shows that success on gender issues within the labour movement could only be achieved through collective gender identity and solidarity. As already illustrated in the previous chapter, by the late 1980s, COSATU women were already aware of the weaknesses of the race-based solidarity in terms of promoting the interests of women.

## Struggles for hegemonic control of the women's movement

The transition process raised several issues for women's organisation in South Africa. The first issue, as already pointed out above, relates to unity and forming a women's movement that would unite women and speak with one voice on the interests and demands of women. Women's organisation during the apartheid era was mostly regional and community based. Thus with the advent of the democratisation process, the main challenge confronting women was consolidating women's power to impact effectively on the transition process and the drafting of the new constitution of the country to ensure that it is gender representative. The second issue relates to hegemonic control of the women's movement. The opening of the political space raised stakes for leadership and control of the constitution-making process, not only between women and men, but also among women themselves.<sup>211</sup>

In February 1990 the ban on political organisations in South Africa was lifted and the apartheid government began the process of negotiating a democratic transition. The ANCWL was re-launched in August 1990, and this also meant reclaiming the political space and gaining control of the women's organisation in South Africa. As a popular organisation within African communities this was not an impossible task. In 1991 most of the women's organisations that had affiliated to the United Democratic Front (UDF)<sup>212</sup> during the apartheid period merged into the ANCWL.<sup>213</sup> This merger made the ANCWL the largest women's organisation, with a considerable working-class constituency.

COSATU women's structures, however, could not be disbanded easily or merged into the ANCWL because of their organisation in the workplace. COSATU women's organisation within the labour movement was therefore a

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<sup>211</sup> See Hassim (2006) for a detailed discussion on the tensions between internal women activists and the returning exiles.

<sup>212</sup> When the UDF was formed in 1983, it regarded itself as the front for the banned ANC. Until the transition period, UDF played a central role in mobilising and coordinating campaigns against the apartheid government. In 1991 it disbanded and merged into the ANC (Seekings, 2000).

<sup>213</sup> Hassim (2006) notes that some women within these organisations were sceptical about merging into the ANCWL. However, these women felt that they had limited options within a political context that was more in favour of ANCWL's dominance and control of the women's movement.

challenge for the centralisation of power within the ANCWL. Women's organisation in the workplace meant that they also represented a significant portion of the working-class. COSATU women's forums were organised nationally, and held women's conferences annually. This provided the opportunity to meet at the national level and develop a national plan for women's activities within the labour movement.

COSATU women's organisation in the workplace and the fact that they represented the same constituency as the ANCWL created challenges for hegemonic control. According to Rachmat Omar (Interview 2005), the ANCWL raised questions about possibilities of disbanding the women's forums since they (ANCWL) represented women.

...The idea that COSATU women's sub-committee should disband was being thrown around in some of the discussions on the grounds that the women's league was there, there was no need for another women's formation ... As you can imagine that was a position that was not supported in COSATU women's structures" (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

Omar asserts that the ANCWL was not taking cognisance of the political developments, which had taken place over the years while they were in exile. One of the major developments during that period was the growth of the trade union movement and its strong presence within the workplace. COSATU was "organised, we had power, and we were recognised by people on the ground..." (Mathapelo Makgoba, Interview 2005). Omar adds that:

The ANC did have a strong representation of working-class women and at the broader political level I can see some basis for their arguments ... you could equally argue that there was no need for COSATU and that the ANC could represent the interests of workers and the working-class through its alliance with the Communist Party. These arguments were being made at the level of women. COSATU disputed that because the women's structures have grown as part of the process of building the trade unions and the struggle for workers' rights, under conditions of extreme repression. And so there was a need for COSATU's sub-committee to exist to represent women in the workplace and also in the unions and in COSATU structures (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

COSATU women's structures were more than about representation of women workers' rights within the workplace. These structures represented the history of women's organisation within the workplace and the labour movement. They symbolised women workers' struggles against male domination of working-class politics, and consequently access to the public political space. The women's structures had a symbolic value and women were proud of this significant

achievement. And “...so they were not about to throw away a victory, a gain, which they earned through hard struggles...” (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

COSATU women’s resistance to disbanding their structures was also about maintaining their autonomy and access to the public political sphere. The transition period presented opportunities for women to be involved in political issues at the macro level. It presented opportunities for influencing political decision-making processes at a level at which for decades women in South Africa had been denied access. The possibility of influencing the drafting of the country’s constitution was a significant opportunity in the history of South African women’s political struggles. According to Makgoba:

...We realised that we need to be on par with what the ANC was doing to avoid being swallowed by them ... Basically I think that is what was in our minds then, to really push a line where we would have a say in the government that would be elected (Mathapelo Makgoba, Interview 2005).

The struggles between COSATU women and the ANCWL over which would dominate the political space also underlined issues of legitimacy (who can speak on working-class issues or who can best represent working-class women) and the extent to which women’s interests can be unanimously articulated in a single chorus. Although the ANCWL had a large working-class constituency, it was not necessarily homogenous (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).<sup>214</sup> The ANCWL was perceived as a multi-class organisation representing diverse interest groups, within which women workers’ voices could be muted if they were not organised. COSATU women believed that their structures were critical for the representation of women workers interests during the transition period. “COSATU represented workers, and the ANC represented the political structures” (Mathapelo Makgoba, Interview 2005).

Omar (Interview 2005) argues that COSATU’s decision to retain their women’s structures remained a source of tension between COSATU women and the ANCWL. These tensions are noted in some of the women’s workshops wherein COSATU women made attempts to discuss their working relationship with the ANCWL as well as the campaign for the Women’s Charter.<sup>215</sup> On several occasions, speakers from the ANCWL were invited to lead discussions on these issues, but these were never accepted. Such tendencies led COSATU women to question the relationship with the ANCWL and to express “concern

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<sup>214</sup> Omar was the educational officer in COSATU during this period. She took part in the COSATU women’s structures and also participated in the initial meetings of the coalition.

<sup>215</sup> COSATU 2<sup>nd</sup> National Campaigns Conference, Wits University 7-9 September 1990 (SAHA Archives) and Minutes of NEDCOM Women’s Sub-committee meeting held on Johannesburg on 1 February 1992 (SAHA Archives).

that the Women's League appears to have other priorities which do not give importance to establishing a structural relationship with COSATU and in fact has led to a complete breakdown of such a relationship at national level."<sup>216</sup>

## The Women's National Coalition: understanding the differences?

In April 1992 the WNC was launched by the initiative of the ANCWL. It brought together organisations from different racial groups, classes, geographical location and political ideologies. The uniting theme of the WNC was acknowledging the differences and building unity on this basis. According to Masangwane, the WNC "had a mandate of uniting all women under one platform, irrespective of political affiliation, with the purpose of drafting the women's charter. That was the mandate of the WNC" (Interview 2007).

According to the women interviewed, the first meeting of the WNC was attended in large numbers by women from various organisations and backgrounds. For COSATU women, the first meeting of the WNC was their initial experience of being in forum with white women and other organisations with which in the past they had never cooperated. Sibongile Masangwane points out that:

...Our first impressions were 'will this work? We are not used to working with women from the National Party (NP then apartheid ruling party), Democratic Party (DP) or other white women's organisations. It was broad. We have never contemplated a situation where we would be on the same table with women from the National Party, DP and even other parties and organisations ... We had never in the history of South Africa cooperated with Boer women, churchwomen ... You know it was so broad it included so many people. We came into contact with so many new people and organisations, which we never even knew existed (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

Some within COSATU were very sceptical of this new relationship, especially with women from the NP, which was the party of the apartheid regime. According to Joyce Pekani (Interview 2004) "I saw contradictions because there was nothing common between us and them. There was no way I could have common interests or feelings with..." someone from the National Party (Joyce Pekani, interview 2004).

The broad base of the WNC however was not only in terms of race or political ideology, but also in terms of socio-economic and educational status. And these differences were also observed within organisations that were predominantly

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<sup>216</sup> Minutes of NEDCOM Women's Sub-committee meeting held on Johannesburg on 1 February 1992 (SAHA Archives).

black and represented working-class women, like the ANCWL and the Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP). According to Makgoba:

We had women like Sheila Camerer, Faith Gasa, and Frene. And COSATU women, we were just working-class ... you could just imagine Frene Ginwala is one of the top lawyers, one of the most respected women in the ANC; we had Sheila Camerer from DP... we had Dene Smuts from the NP; mme (Sesotho word for mother, used as a form of respect for an elder person) Faith Gasa from the IFP ... I'm telling you they were talking big jargon law language... (Mathapelo Makgoba, Interview 2005).

These differences were highlighted several times during the meetings. Firstly language differences raised tensions in the coalition.<sup>217</sup> According to Omar (Interview 2005), "it was insisted that the meetings should be held in English. That also became a contestation." The lack of flexibility on the language of communication at the coalition created barriers for many women from working-class backgrounds who had difficulties in expressing themselves fully in English. COSATU therefore insisted on the availability of translators for its members and "white women complained that there was no need for such as it would drag the meetings, and we were supposed to finish at a particular time" (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004). Having lost on the issue, Omar recalls that:

COSATU made its own arrangements to make its own members available for the meetings to act as translators... There would be women who were not confident in articulating in English and so on the spot they would have to find interpreters (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

This challenged the WNC's notion of unity on the basis of difference and the extent to which these differences were accommodated. It also highlighted the gap in women's different social backgrounds (working-class and middle/upper class) and social status in terms of understanding each other's social reality. The middle/upper class women (both black and white) who were confident and articulate in English regarded that language as an obvious choice for communication in the WNC since in their daily interactions it is considered the automatic choice for use in formal public arenas like in the WNC. However, this was different for working-class women whose interactions in the political arena are still largely dominated by the use of their home languages (these include women from SeSotho, IsiZulu, IsiXhosa, SePedi as well as Afrikaans language backgrounds who were part of the delegations).

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<sup>217</sup> The issue of "language barriers" is noted in the minutes of the coalition's meeting (25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> April 1992) but it is not dealt with in detail (Minutes of the Women's National Coalition Workshop, April 1992).

The second issue that highlighted the divisions within the WNC was the conflict over the times set for the meetings and the venues for these meetings. "...Quite often the meetings were held during the day and COSATU representatives were not full-time officials, they were workers and could not make meetings during the day..." (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

Meetings would be called at the time when we would be at work and venues would be at places suitable for them. They had the advantage of not working and having access to cars, and so they felt they could call meetings any time they felt like it. Most of us did not have access to transport or cars and it was an inconvenience for us in terms of attending meetings at the times they suggested and also at their own proposed venues (Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004).

COSATU representatives suggested that meetings be held between 5pm and 7pm after working hours (this were the times which local branch union meetings used to be held). This was however opposed by the middle-class dominated WNC "because most of the white women did not have jobs and those who did have jobs they had flexibility" (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005). According to Omar, even women within the ANCWL failed to support COSATU on this issue, since most of them were full-time officials in the ANC and their positions within the organisation enabled them to fully concentrate on the WNC.

Thirdly, the differences were also highlighted in the issues that were raised and in how these were prioritised in the WNC. The socio-economic disparities were more apparent in the concerns of the working-class women.

You would come up with a point for instance you would suggest that 'as women, we want each house to have fridges, washing machines and cooking stoves to make it easy for us.' This is the Women's Charter right? A white woman will stand up ... she doesn't see the need for me. She will argue 'Hayi (no) you can't include this here, that this is not suitable for the Women's Charter. You can buy your own washing machine.' Remember we are coming from different levels. They are coming from a better level. I come from that level where I have to wake up every morning and go to work, and after work I have meetings to attend. So for me it made sense to have a washing machine, that it should be compulsory for each and every household in South Africa. Do you get my argument? So that caused delays in the meetings because everything had to be debated and a common understanding had to be reached in the end (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

These kind of differences easily raised tensions in the WNC, especially in a context where white women have black women employed as domestic workers to

take care of their households.<sup>218</sup> Using the metaphor of “Mrs and a girl [madam and eve] ...” to highlight the hierarchical power relations within the coalition, Themba Kgasi (Interview, 2004) argues that there were fundamental disagreements on issues to be prioritised, based on the unequal status which both occupied outside the coalition.

Because of their different experiences of discrimination, women had different expectations from the WNC. Working-class women had explicit objectives for the WNC, and expected the charter to address their specific experiences. The WNC faced major challenges in reconciling these differences, particularly when it came to raising issues of basic needs. Women like Masangwane who are based in the urban areas brought up fridges, cooking-stoves and washing machines as basic needs, while women from the rural areas were still struggling for such basics as access to clean water, sanitation and electricity to ‘make their lives easier.’ Lydia Kompe, who represented the Rural Women’s Movement at the WNC, pointed out these differences. She asserts that:

... It’s not going to be easy to be on par with the urban women because some of the basic needs for rural women are not an issue to urban-based women. Like when we talk about water, electricity, it’s not an issue for them. But we are still right at that stage where we are still fighting to have access to clean water, electricity, to have proper roads for transportation. So we are still very, very different (Lydia Kompe, 2005).

According to COSATU women interviewed in this research, cooperation in the WNC “... was not an easy thing because we had women ... who had never been exposed to poverty ... Because of the class differences ...we had different interests” (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).

...We used to fight for our issues to be discussed but we were strong to push for our issues to be included in the agenda ... our issues would be tabled but then the small white NGOs would oppose our issues” (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

And as shown above, the differences were not only in terms of class or race, but also geographical background. Rural women faced the most challenges since the “urban-based women dominated the WNC.” According to Lydia Kompe:

It was very difficult at times because you can’t deny the fact that the urban-based women dominated the WNC, and that they are more informed than us. They are more assertive and

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<sup>218</sup> Cock (1980) examines the nature of domestic work in South Africa, which is mainly black and female. She highlights the unequal power relations between white and black women within the apartheid South African society. She further demonstrates that the racial ‘superiority’ or domination of white women under apartheid South Africa enables their exploitation of black women.

articulate compared to rural women. And they also wanted to pursue their issues first ... It was a struggle to really put our issues on the agenda. They were always at the bottom of the agenda. You could see that even when you read the Women's Charter, our issues are right at the end. But we ensured that they are not left out ... we stuck to our ground and demanded that our issues are also discussed (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).

The diversity of the organisations within the coalition meant that women had to compete for their interests to be represented on the agenda of the meetings. Women's experiences of gender oppression varied and these were largely influenced by their social location within an apartheid society. "So the kinds of demands, kinds of clauses and kinds of rights that women wanted to see in the constitution were not always the same" (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

### The process of drafting the Women's Charter and the challenges with the decision-making processes

WNC also faced challenges in terms of different practices and traditions in decision-making processes. COSATU's tradition of decision-making was a bottom-up approach of mandates and consultation with the workers, who are considered the core of the labour movement. For COSATU women, the traditions of participatory democracy (mandates, report backs and consultation) were central to their participation at the WNC.<sup>219</sup> Masangwane explains that:

... Our method of working differed from the WNC. We participated with a mandate and when we came back from the WNC we had to take information to our gender office, and from there it had to be taken to the affiliates and discussed there ... So we were always relying on our members and mandates from the organisation ... While the process at the WNC was moving very fast and we were being left behind. That's where our frustration was... (Sibongile Masangwane, interview 2007).

Although they acknowledged that their method was a long process, the labour movement still considered mandates and consultations with membership as crucial in the whole process of drafting the Women's Charter. Their emphasis was inclusiveness and the representation of the actual interests of their constituencies. Trade unionists observed "intellectuals ... who just get up and say anything they wanted and that would be noted" (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

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<sup>219</sup> Hassim (2006) also discusses these differences within the WNC and indicates that these traditions were also similar to other locally based working-class women's organisations that emerged under repressive apartheid conditions in the 1980s.

...We were bound to consult... These other organisations were just talking and these were causing tensions. We were concerned with the mandates as COSATU... What we discovered at the coalition was that it was so easy for people to second (support) and vote on the issues raised. But for us how were we supposed to second and vote on issues, which we did not have a mandate on? This is what made many people to be upset with COSATU. They felt as if we were rigid (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

The problems of mandates also brought up the role of intellectuals who were participating as individuals without any constituencies. Makgoba (Interview 2007) suggests that some of these women were participating because they were doing research on the WNC. According to Makgoba (Interview 2007), “these individuals” (referring to academics and legal experts) were participating in the WNC and representing their own academic interests. COSATU women felt that “we were coming up with issues which were not theoretical, but real issues that women workers were confronted with” (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2005).<sup>220</sup>

The other factor, which COSATU women raised in the WNC, was that the drafting of the charter should be more open and involve the broader spectrum of working-class women. “At times we were not really happy with the WNC because it left out some people on the ground, particularly those who were not organised” (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). Masangwane explains that:

...Our feeling was that, yes we are participating in the WNC. But if you want to draw a Women’s Charter in South Africa, the method that was used in the drafting of the Freedom Charter<sup>221</sup> is the best. There should be people who go out to Khayelitsha, Alexander, Eldorado;<sup>222</sup> you see... we were of that thinking that the Women’s Charter should not be drafted only on the table. You should go out to the people and hear their views. Go all over the place and be foot-soldiers, collect people’s views and bring them to the table and compile them (Sibongile Masangwane).

The contention was that the drafting process through “little committee discussions” was “elitist” and exclusionary (Omar, Interview 2005).<sup>223</sup> It gave

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<sup>220</sup> Hassim (2006) notes the failure of the coalition to clarifying convincingly the critical point of uniting different women’s organisations, especially with the violence in Kwa-Zulu Natal and the tensions between the IFP and UDF women’s organisations. This is another indication of the failure of the coalition in explaining and clearly defining the role of intellectuals and legal experts in the drafting of the Women’s Charter.

<sup>221</sup> The Freedom Charter was adopted in 1955 and it involved a collection of people’s demands from door to door and these were then compiled into the people’s Freedom Charter.

<sup>222</sup> These are working-class townships with largely unemployed and unorganised women.

<sup>223</sup> These, however, were similar challenges that their male counterparts also noted in their participation in the transition process through the ANC alliance structures. In COSATU’s labour issues journal *The Shopsteward* (Vol. 1.2 August/September 1992) Jay Naidoo (then General Secretary) and Sam Shilowa (then Deputy Secretary) argue that “people felt excluded from the

decision-making powers to a limited group of individuals, and denied the majority of women the opportunity to control or influence directly the direction of the charter process. Therefore, to enable working-class and unorganised women to be part of the process a door-to-door campaign to collect views and demands from these constituencies was proposed. This proposition was initially opposed by other organisations (mainly white middle-class) within the coalition. Women interviewed in this research indicate that several reasons were advanced such as the feasibility and the time issue, since the time available for drafting the charter was limited (Omar, Interview 2005; Makgoba, Interview 2005; and Masangwane, Interview 2007).

According to Omar, "... it was a battle to get agreements that workshops or meetings should be held in the township..." (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005). With the push from COSATU and some women's organisations, with a largely working-class backing, the WNC agreed to have workshops and focus group meetings in the townships. In addition, organisations were asked to collect the views and demands of women in their communities and surrounding areas (Masangwane, Interview 2007).

Disagreements over the methods of operation at the WNC underline differences over the fundamental principles of the organisations within the WNC. It also indicates the differences in terms of traditions and practices that are influenced by the contexts within which these different organisations emerged and operated. Firstly, the labour movement's core foundation principles are participatory democracy, whereby the unions negotiate and make decisions on the basis of mandates from their constituency. Throughout the organisation and mobilisation of the labour movement these principles have been fundamental in building up membership and strengthening the labour movement. Secondly, the labour movement's emphasis in their organisation of the working-class has been about ownership (of trade unions by the workers) and empowerment of the workers through decision-making processes. This has been particularly critical in the apartheid workplace context in which the black workers were humiliated and deprived of power.

The challenge by COSATU and other working-class organisations for participatory meetings in townships further indicates power struggles within the WNC. It was a struggle for control and ownership of the process, chiefly conducted by organisations that had been in the country during the apartheid struggle and felt that they had more legitimacy in representing working-class interests.

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process ...the negotiations were not based on mandates. There was no way for people to direct the process" (4).

We fought for this liberation because we were in South Africa. We are the ones who were chasing the mellow yellows.<sup>224</sup> We did not leave the country in 1976. We stayed behind and we fought (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2007).

## Did COSATU have impact on the WNC?

During the interviews I raised questions concerning the extent to which COSATU women were able to articulate their issues within a structure heavily dominated by educated middle class women. Some of the women pointed out the occasions where they “felt personally that we were undermined.”

We were undermined because we were workers, most of us were not educated, and most of us had never travelled. Some of the people were brilliant, you know when you are educated you are able to put things in a particular way... (Mathapelo Makgoba, Interview 2005).

A realisation of not being able to effectively influence or drive the WNC process is also acknowledged in COSATU women’s meeting in 1993. The meeting notes: “our participation has not been effective at all. We have failed to drive the WNC as COSATU or as the alliance.”<sup>225</sup>

At the same time however, the interviewees were talking about the power and influence that COSATU women had in the WNC. They argue, “COSATU was very strong... COSATU fought for freedom, it was respected for its commitment” (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004) “COSATU women were very strong... we had very strong representatives” (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005) who were able to engage in the debates at the WNC and assert the position of the working-class movement.

In an attempt to explain this ambiguity in COSATU women’s participation within the WNC and the extent to which they influenced the Women’s Charter process, Rachmat Omar argues:

COSATU women were highly experienced unionists and they had fought many, many battles in the workplace and in the unions. At one level it looks like the middle class women would enjoy more power. And its something, which they did, like they generally controlled the venues where the meetings took place; they would play these games about changing the order of items on the agenda. But COSATU women were extremely experienced and in many ways they could assert themselves, and they did fight... Those sets of issues that women wanted to be included in the constitution for poor women, women in the rural areas, the role of traditional law and custom,

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<sup>224</sup> Yellow Police cars often referred to as mellow yellows in the townships during the 1980s.

<sup>225</sup> Minutes of COSATU National Women’s Meeting, 3-5 September 1993.

those issues are in the constitution. So in that sense I think they had a big impact in influencing the content of the constitution (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005).

The Charter reflects the Coalition's attempts at redefining women's issues based on the local context, taking into consideration the direct experiences and needs of women. And this is supported by article five of the Charter on *Development, Infrastructure and the Environment*.<sup>226</sup> For instance article five states:

Adequate, accessible and safe water supplies and sanitation should be made available to all communities, including those in rural areas and informal settlements; women must have equal access to land and security of tenure, including women living under customary law.<sup>227</sup>

In reviewing the contents of the Women's Charter, one gets a sense that indeed working-class women's demands are reflected.<sup>228</sup> The demands raised in the Charter do reflect COSATU women's campaigns and struggles for gender equality within the workplace and the labour movement. For instance, the Charter advocates the redefinition of the family to include single parent households, equality within the family, marriages and intimate relationships and the intervention of the state in the regulation of private relationships (article eight).<sup>229</sup> These are some of the demands women made in various campaigns, including the parental and childcare rights campaign (see chapter three).

Article eleven of the Charter notes women's inadequate access to health care services and information on health issues. It states that "women have the right of control over their bodies which includes the right to reproductive decisions; access to information and knowledge to enable women to make informed choices about their bodies and about health care should be provided." In 1988 when COSATU women had their first women's congress (discussed in chapter seven), similar resolutions were adopted at the congress.

The WNC's effort to avoid racial tensions and build racial harmony is noticeable in the emphasis it places on patriarchal subordination, and limited reference to explicit racial differences in women's experiences.<sup>230</sup> The Charter focuses explicitly on patriarchal subordination. It states "if democracy and human rights are to be meaningful for women, they must address our historic subordination and oppression." Article one on *Equality* states further:

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<sup>226</sup> The Women's Charter for Effective Equality, 1994.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> See appendix for the Women's Charter document.

<sup>229</sup> The Women's Charter for Effective Equality, 1994.

<sup>230</sup> The Charter actually has one sentence that makes specific reference to "racism and apartheid" (see preamble of the Charter).

Our struggle for equality involves recognition of the disadvantage that women suffer in all spheres of our lives. As a result similar treatment of women and men may not result in true equality. Therefore the promotion of true equality will sometimes require distinctions to be made. No distinctions, however, should be made that will disadvantage women.<sup>231</sup>

Race and racial inequality in the South African context is a real issue, which I do not believe should be subsumed for any political reasons.<sup>232</sup> African women constitute the majority of the working-class and the poor sections of the population, while white women, in spite of the gender discrimination suffered during the apartheid government, are concentrated within the well-off sections of our society.<sup>233</sup> Therefore failure to make the distinctions between these two groups puts one section of women at an advantage, at the expense of the other. Examples can illustrate this with the affirmative action policy in the workplace and the economic sector, which has largely benefited white women who had privileged access to education and training during the apartheid period.<sup>234</sup> The WNC's concern and strong emphasis on patriarchy and racial unity failed to prioritise measures for closing the gaps and addressing these inequalities among women. To effectively transform the patriarchal gender relations in a society like South Africa, with a long past of colonialism and racism, as acknowledged in the Charter's preamble, both inequalities should be given significance.

Certainly, not all the demands or interests of working-class women were incorporated in the Women's Charter. For instance while article three on the economy addresses the demands made by women for protection against gender discrimination in the workplace and the economy,<sup>235</sup> the Charter does not specify women's maternity and childcare rights. As already indicated in earlier chapters, this has been one of the core demands for women workers. According to Themba Kgasi (Interview 2004), "... maternity as a right was not accepted ...because some of the people that were members of the WNC were also employers. Issues of leave were not accepted." At the 1994 conference of the WNC where the Women's Charter was approved as a women's document, COSATU raised its objection to the lack of specification on maternity leave for women workers. It

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<sup>231</sup> The Women's Charter for Effective Equality, 1994, pp1.

<sup>232</sup> See Buhlungu's (2000:9) discussion of the continued racial inequalities in South Africa's democratic society and the unequal distribution of and access to economic and social resources.

<sup>233</sup> The 1999 October Household Survey shows that a high proportion of African women (51.9 percent) remain outside the labour market, while only 7.3 percent of white women are affected.

<sup>234</sup> Tshoaedi and Hlela (2006:109) show that employment equity measures have widened the gap between white and black women.

<sup>235</sup> The Women's Charter for Effective Equality, 1994.

also pointed out gaps in the economy, unemployed women, living wage, and access for women to business opportunities.<sup>236</sup>

Since COSATU women were still organised within the labour federation, maternity issues and women workers' rights were furthered through COSATU's representation. Their resistance to disbanding their women's structures proved useful when the WNC mission reached a conclusion.<sup>237</sup> It was through these structures that COSATU women continued to make the demands for maternity rights and some of the issues on workplace rights that were not adequately addressed at the WNC. "COSATU women made certain demands and positions known through the positions COSATU was taking" (Rachmat Omar, Interview 2005). This ensured that women workers' rights were also raised in broader forums (constitutional level) that focused on general workers' rights in a democratised South Africa.

Maternity rights are currently covered under the Basic Conditions of Employment Act 1997, which was negotiated at the National Economic, Development and Labour Council (NEDLAC, a tripartite structure that includes government, labour and business sector) after the democratic elections. Initially COSATU demanded six months paid maternity leave, and went out on marches and protests to reinforce this demand.<sup>238</sup> However this was unsuccessful and the Act currently provides women four months maternity leave and protection of their jobs after this period. The agreement does not make it compulsory for employers to pay wages during maternity leave, but has left it to the unions and employers to negotiate a suitable agreement. The Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF) covers maternity leave payment in instances where there is no agreement between employers and workers. Even in cases where the employers pay only a portion of the salary, the UIF pays the balance.

## Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the transition process and the struggles within the WNC for representation of working-class issues. The process of drafting the Women's Charter in the WNC highlighted the challenges for South African women in terms of uniformly defining women's issues. It shows that differences

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<sup>236</sup> Women's National Coalition Conference, World Trade Centre, 25-27 February, 1994 (full report) (Mayibuye Center Archives).

<sup>237</sup> The delegates at the 1994 conference suggested the continuance of the WNC, although many objected to its political domination. Therefore it was suggested that the WNC should continue as an independent movement without the interference of political parties, and that the leadership should not be dominated by individuals from political organisations (see WNC's full report). However, Hassim (2006) notes that this prescription spelled disaster for the WNC, as it lost most of the individuals with the capacity to drive the organisation.

<sup>238</sup> COSATU Campaigns Bulletin.

among women are based not only on racial differences, but class or geographical location influence how women define gender discrimination or issues that are of specific concern. These differences had a major impact on their expectations from the WNC and a democratised South Africa.

This chapter has also highlighted the outcomes of the charter process and argues that it reflects a working-class content. More importantly, it reflects on the issues raised by COSATU women within the labour movement and the workplace in demanding women workers' rights and the transformation of policies or laws that discriminated against women. Although the charter reflects working-class women's interests, not all their issues were included in the charter. Furthermore, the charter's emphasis on patriarchal oppression undermines the differences between women. The limited emphasis on racial differences undermines the 'different levels' that women occupy in society, and this is reflected in the proposed measures for addressing gender inequities, which would make distinctions between women and men in affirmative action measures.

## Conclusion

### The political mobilisation of African women: the significance of racial identity

This thesis has examined the mobilization of women in trade union organisations from their emergence in the early 1970s, during the apartheid period and in the post apartheid era. It has investigated the role of women in building the labour movement in South Africa and their contribution to the history of the labour movement.

When questioning women activists about their initial involvement in trade union activities, I focused on their observations of their social surroundings during their early years. I emphasized the importance of the social background or biography of individuals in gaining a deeper understanding of their activism in the labour movement. Many women interviewed in this study argue that the political context - that of the apartheid government's violation of African people's constitutional rights - influenced them and made them aware of the injustices in South African society. For instance, women who experienced the early years of apartheid repression in the 1950s and 1960s stated that incidents of land disposessions and forced removals were critical in raising their political consciousness. The generations of women that witnessed the student and community uprisings from the late 1970s to the late 1980s also attributed their political awareness to the events within their social surroundings. The injustices witnessed in their social contexts created a sense of animosity and anger against white rule and domination.

The roots of union activism of the women in this study can be traced to the social context: the racism and racial injustices in South Africa are the principle reasons for the mobilization of most of the women featured in this research. This racism and the injustice suffered by African people were also experienced in the workplace. Women activists reported incidents illustrative of racism in the workplace: they told of frequent physical assaults on African workers by management, of African workers being treated like servants and subjected to demands that they wash their bosses' cars or to do domestic work in their homes. The indignity of such experiences of racism is critical in the building of solidarity between women and men workers in the workplace. It is on the basis of common racial identity that women developed solid working-class bonds with African men workers. The study demonstrates that, although working-class identity is critical for solidarity and collective action in the workplace, racial identity was the most significant factor in this instance. For most women in this study working-class activism has been largely influenced by their racial identity and apartheid repression.

The participation of these women activists in the trade union movement is closely tied up with experiences of racial domination in their past and present lives. Social movement theory (see chapter two) contends that when individuals become involved in social movements or organisations they have a self that has been influenced or created through various experiences (see Tarrow, 1994; della Porta and Diani 2006). In attempting to influence individuals to participate in actions to challenge the aggrieved situation, social movements provide explanations, linkages and solutions to these experiences. Within the context of this study, the trade union movement played a role in linking individuals' experiences to the broader political context of apartheid oppression. It developed a situation of 'us' (the African workers) and 'them' (white employers/supervisors who were part of the apartheid regime) within the workplace (see Taylor 1999; Benford and Snow, 2000; McAdam 1996).

The frame alignment of the trade union movement was drawn selectively from the dominant political context, which gave priority to racial differences and inequalities. The frame selection reflects a cultural practice that gave less consideration to gender differences or gender equity. The frame mobilisation of the South African labour movement during the period under study highlighted particular events to evoke the greatest support from the African majority (see Snow, 2004). Framing issues around racism or apartheid oppression and working-class experiences within the workplace appealed to all the women in this research, just as much as it appealed to African men. These issues cut across both gender groups, therefore making it easier to achieve full unity.

This frame mobilisation was successful in building collective solidarity between African women and men in the workplace, but it did not make a distinction between their experiences within the apartheid context. It failed to take into account women's intersecting and multiple experiences on the basis of their gender, their race and working-class status. These women's experiences of discrimination on the basis of their race, both in society and in the workplace, were greatly affected by their gender status. A frame mobilisation that did not include gender discrimination was therefore inadequate to address fully the particular forms of oppression experienced by African women (see Brush, 1999).

In chapter seven I demonstrated the contradictions and divisions that emerged once women asserted themselves on issues of gender inequality or discrimination. The South African labour movement has been reluctant to extend collective solidarity and unity on issues of gender equity. For most men unionists, the process of consciousness development takes place at the level of race and class; as a result, their activism is limited to such issues. However, for women members this process occurs at three levels, race, class and gender. Women's activism therefore takes place at all three levels. This research concurs with feminist scholars (McBride and Mazur, forthcoming; Feree, 2006 and Beckwith, 2000) who emphasise the interconnectedness of women's experiences within these categories.

This study shows that even though African women experienced certain levels of exclusion within the male dominated African working class collective, they faced obstacles in developing collective identity and solidarity with women from other racial groupings. Racial identity was a critical factor in determining the forms of solidarity within the workplace. The racial hierarchy that dominated the workplace and society in general limited opportunities to develop strong bonds and solidarity between women of different racial groups. The difference in privileges, working conditions and wages that were accorded the different racial groups created divisions amongst the working-class. Although the labour laws under the apartheid regime discriminated against women in the workplace in general, African women suffered the greatest degree of discrimination. For instance, most of the interviewees underscored the discrimination in maternity leave arrangements: the African women faced the risk of losing their jobs, while white women were often merely demoted.

## Women and the struggles for trade union rights in South Africa

Evidence presented in this research reflects on women's agency in trade union mobilisation and workplace struggles. Some women activists were active and leading participants in the 1970s workers' strikes over wages and working

conditions that resulted in the granting of trade union recognition and workers' rights in the workplace in 1979. Women's active participation in the formation of trade unions in various workplaces continued into the 1980s and early 1990s.

The majority of the women interviewed in this study were at the forefront of mobilising fellow workers into trade union organisation and workplace struggles for trade union rights within their specific workplaces. By mobilising fellow workers to join trade unions they were the driving force in the process of forming trade unions within their various workplaces. Their 'bravery' in initiating trade union activities at the risk of being fired resulted in their election to shop-steward positions. In these positions, some of these women activists led strikes against low wages and bad working conditions; and some have come to the defence of their fellow workers against racist or unfair treatment by management.

This evidence challenges earlier writers (see for instance Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006; Von Holdt, 2003; Baskin, 1992 and Webster, 1988) on the South African labour movement who have tended to neglect or even ignore women's activism in the trade union movement, thereby associating trade union struggles with male workers only. Contrary to the suggestions from these earlier analyses, it has been demonstrated that women workers have been active participants in trade union activities and workplace struggles at leadership levels. It has been demonstrated that, like their male counterparts, women workers also develop a working-class consciousness and are just as capable initiating action against management. These findings continue to highlight the limitations in the conceptualisation of working-class consciousness that often exclude women workers (see Fonow, 2003; Berger, 1992 and Scott, 1988).

Women's involvement in trade union activities brings to the fore the distinctions in the identity of the working-class. It also indicates the diversity of working-class issues. Women's fight against sexism in the workplace, tackling issues such as discrimination in employment opportunities and wages, and sexual harassment, expands our understanding of working-class politics. Fights against these underscore the gendered nature of working-class politics, something that is frequently forgotten in analyses of working-class struggles (see Fonow, 2003; Berger, 1992 and Scott, 1988).

Women's activism within trade unions calls into question the 'maternal instincts' theory discussed earlier in the thesis (see chapter one). All too often women's participation in political action is explained in terms of their maternal roles, protection and nurturing of the family. The activism of women trade unionists explored in this research, which often intersected with political activism through challenging workplace and apartheid legislation, casts doubt on these conclusions. Their activism and commitment to political action has deep meanings that transcend their identities as women, mothers or wives. Women

activists experienced the same feelings of humiliation and anger against the system of apartheid oppression as their male counterparts. Their motivations to become activists and to challenge the apartheid system are influenced by their understanding and conception of social justice.

The thesis also demonstrates that for many of these women trade union activism was about more than just workplace politics. There are other factors that account for women's commitment to and interest in trade union activism. Most women talked about the value of trade union education: trade union activism provided education or training opportunities. Women gained skills and expertise in such areas as leadership, communication and negotiation, abilities that they would not have had but for their active roles in the labour movement.

For many women who took leading positions in the mobilisation of fellow workers, trade union activism was empowering. Union activism assigned women roles of leadership and presented opportunities to be involved in decision-making processes within the workplace and the trade union movement. Women reported gaining communication and leadership skills that built their confidence and self-esteem. Trade union activism enabled these women to take positions or roles that society usually reserved for men.

## Processes of gender consciousness resulting from individual experiences

This research also reveals that the development of gender consciousness or awareness of gender inequalities is influenced by a series of life events witnessed in different settings and at different periods. Early experiences of gender discrimination and male domination play a role in women's gender consciousness and the ultimate decision to engage in collective action against these inequalities. Examples include noting unequal power relations within their families, society or in their personal relationships, the violation of women's rights through acts of domestic abuse and sexual violence, and the failure of the judicial system to adequately protect women from such acts. For some of them the hard and distressing experiences of domestic violence within their own families influenced their opposition to male domination of any form.

The family experiences of these women negate Campbell's (1991) notion of 'township ideology' that regards men as the undisputed heads of households and figures of authority (see chapter 1). This research refutes the assertion by Campbell that African women are oblivious of their gender oppression and lack the potential to develop a gender consciousness or to fight against gender inequalities within their families. The majority of the women who come from households with two parents contradict the notion of female submissiveness

within the family. They report witnessing their mothers disagreeing with their fathers' authority or disputing decisions in the household.

Furthermore, the personal experiences of these women in their own interactions with male partners indicate conflicts over male dominance within the household or family. Most women alluded to male dominance in their private relationships. However, women show different strategies of opposition to patriarchal dominance by male partners. Some took the radical step of divorcing their husbands or leaving their partners if the man opposed or tried to forbid their decisions to become trade union activists or to take part in trade union activities. Others have remained within their relationships and continue to assert their right to make their own decisions about their trade union activities.

The different strategies adopted by women in this research reflect the variations in their experiences of patriarchal domination or control. Most of those women who decided on divorce or separation felt that their partners' interference was extreme and intolerable. This differed in the case of those who persisted as activists while continuing the relationship.

These findings contradict implications of homogeneity in African women's experiences of patriarchal domination implied by Bozzoli (1983) and Campbell (1991). The approaches that these women adopt to challenge patriarchal relations is often influenced by the social context. The variety of these experiences and how they are addressed is influenced by the generational differences of these women and their social location. I demonstrated the significance of the changes in the social context, including the views on marriage, single parenting and definitions of a family. The values and norms emphasised by society at different periods and the changes experienced over time have an impact on their observations and experiences within their personal relationships, and women's decisions on how to deal with the challenges they face. It is suggested further that the changes in the economic status of women in society (access to employment opportunities and better occupational positions) has an impact on the nature of gender relations within the South African society.

## Collective gender solidarity and activism against gender inequality

In my assessment of the mobilization of women into trade union activities, I also examined women's struggles against gender inequality within the workplace and the labour movement. Women activists interviewed in this research stated that sexist attitudes were experienced in the workplace and in the unions, from both white and African males. According to the women in this study, white males

dominated management categories in the workplace, while African males occupied key leadership positions within the labour movement.

This domination by men resulted in a male collusion in the workplace. The definitions of workplace issues or working conditions made by employers and the male trade union leadership excluded gender discrimination or sexism (for example equal pay for work of equal value, sexual harassment or maternity leave). The notion of men as heads of households or breadwinners, while women were dependent on men, still dominated society. This assumption was the justification for paying higher wages to men, discriminating against women (and even full-time employment).

Women have challenged not only male hegemony in trade union leadership, but also have brought a gender element to the articulation and representation of working-class interests. As with the contentions made by social movement theorists such as della Porta and Diani (2006), this study shows differentiation between women and men in social movement participation. The interests and concerns of these groups are determined by their everyday life experiences that vary significantly from each other.

In examining women's activism within COSATU unions, I demonstrated that processes within trade unions are most certainly gendered. I argued that participation in social movements like the South African labour movement is often characterised by gender struggles. My interviews revealed the contests within the labour movement over identifying and placing issues of gender discrimination on its agenda, and the fight against the apartheid regime. The prioritisation of goals within social movements like trade unions is often contested.

This study suggests that the cleavages between women and men within the labour movement is a major factor in the emergence of collective gender solidarity and identity among African working-class women in the workplace from the early 1980s (see della Porta and Diani, 2006; McAdam, 1992). The collective solidarity and gender identity emerge from the conscious efforts of leading women activists within the labour movement (See della Porta and Diani). Some women set up separate spaces to enable them to develop collective gender identity and further strategies for challenging gender inequities within the labour movement. This in turn, stimulated other women to take part in women's structures. Women within the unions have used these structures (or 'havens') to mobilise and introduce issues of gender equity into the debates of the labour movement.

Analysis of gender processes within social movements, especially trade unions, is often neglected (see Fonow, 2003; Einwohner, Hollander and Olson, 2000 and Taylor, 1999). Unlike most studies on South African trade unions (see

Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006; Von Holdt 2003; Baskin, 1992 and Webster, 1988), this research contributes to our understanding of how gender differences within trade unions produce different struggles within the South African labour movement. It contradicts assertions made by women studies scholars (see Hassim, 1991; Horn, 1991; Charman, de Swart and Simons, 1991) who suggest that women activists within the liberation movements, including the trade unions, lack gender consciousness or the capacity to challenge gender inequities within these organisations. Such scholars have overlooked the campaigns and debates raised by women activists within the trade unions to highlight issues of gender inequality and male domination of the leadership structures.

This research demonstrates the gender consciousness of women activists within the trade union movement from the early 1980s. It has been shown that from as early as 1983, women activists within the trade unions organised women's structures where issues of women's subordination within the family, including relationships with male partners or husbands, the workplace and trade unions were challenged. Women like Thembi Nabe, Lydia Kompe and Maggie Magubane, who have been active in the trade unions from the early 1970s, have been vocal on these issues (see chapter three). It has also been shown that when COSATU was launched in 1985, women activists insisted that COSATU adopt resolutions to fight against all forms of gender inequality within the workplace and in society as a whole.

The political opportunity structure and the ability to identify relevant opportunities are central in women's struggles for placing women's issues on the agenda of the labour movement. According to della Porta and Diani (2006) political opportunities are a subjective category that is contingent on the participants' interpretations of the observed changes within the social structure and how those changes could influence the attainment of particular goals of the movement.

The launch of COSATU in 1985 was significant for the working class as it signalled their strength to stand against both employers and the apartheid regime. The labour movement saw its growth and strength as an opportunity to broaden its focus beyond the workplace. This meant challenging racist workplace practices as well as fighting to end the racist apartheid regime. This was a significant opportunity for women to make demands that this expansion should also include a focus on gender equity as a broader issue. This thesis has shown that the adoption of the resolution on gender equality by COSATU in 1985 has been used by women in making demands for transformation and increased representation of women in the leadership structures of trade unions and the whole labour movement.

Worker democracy and equality are the founding principles of the labour movement. Systems like mandated decision-making, consensus and voting have been the key to the success and growth of the labour movement in the late 1970s and 1980s. These are often presented in terms of promoting equality, fairness and full participation of members in the democratic processes of the trade unions. However, in this research it has been shown that these principles do not necessarily include all the members of the labour movement. Women within the trade unions had to battle to transform male centred policies to be inclusive and gender sensitive.

This study has demonstrated that within male dominated arenas like the trade union movement, the democratic principle can be easily used to oppose demands for gender transformation. This was evident in chapter seven where women consistently demanded gender sensitive policies that recognised women as part of the labour movement and deserving to be in leadership positions. This can be illustrated firstly by women's demand for a code for sexual harassment, which was rejected outright by the male dominated congress in 1989. The code was only adopted in 1994 after a series of reports of sexual harassment incidents during a national congress. The second illustration is women's demands for access to leadership positions, and for measures such as affirmative action and quota system to be put in place to transform the leadership structures. As shown, the quota system was opposed on the basis that it would weaken the well-established principles of democracy where individuals are elected on the basis of merit.

It has been shown that the way in which the principle of democracy is being applied in the trade unions protects and advances male domination, and the concentration of power in male hands. Consensus politics, based on the principle of mandates and equal voting do not necessarily translate to "equality of influence on political decision" (Phillips, 1991:15).

Women in the trade unions have fought persistently, and have succeeded in changing policies and making the labour movement gender sensitive or conscious: however, this has mostly remained on paper without being translated into practice. Chauvinistic male attitudes still dominate in the trade unions, even within the leadership structures, and these are critical for gender transformation. I have demonstrated that policy implementation has not been successful due to male resistance to any attempts to transform the leadership and power structure of the trade unions. The available figures estimate women's representation in the trade union at national leadership level at eight percent.

## COSATU women and the transition process

The transition period was a great window of opportunity for women to influence the drafting of the country's constitution and to ensure that women's rights are clearly defined. COSATU women activists regarded the transition period as a critical opportunity to advance women workers' rights within the workplace. This necessitated strengthening their activism to influence the labour movement to take up gender issues in its representation of working-class issues. Their success in pushing COSATU to rework an earlier draft of the Workers' Charter to include substantial gender issues is a case in point.

The other obstacle that COSATU women activists faced during preparations for the launch of the WNC was the struggles between itself and the ANCWL over the issue of disbanding COSATU women's structures. As part of its efforts to consolidate its power and influence within the working-class communities, the ANCWL requested COSATU to disband its women's structures. This meant that the ANCWL would be the major representative of working-class women's interests. However this was opposed by COSATU women activists who argued that the interests of women workers could not be fully articulated by the ANCWL as a political organisation that focuses on broader political issues and also represented multi-class interests. The ANCWL, as a political organisation, was not well placed to articulate on workers' issues within the workplace.

The tensions between the ANCWL and COSATU represented contests over legitimacy and representation of working class women's interests. They also reflect struggles for power, influence and access to public spaces. The transition period and the negotiations working towards democratisation opened opportunities for women, particularly COSATU women activists who had been struggling for women's rights in the workplace, to make demands for gender equality at the constitutional level. Most women activists were eager to seize the opportunity of influencing public debates within this context and participating at the level of drafting women's rights to be included within the country's constitution.

It has been shown that the WNC was formed with the objective of drafting a Women's Charter with women's demands for gender equality to be included in the constitution. The WNC included women from various social, economic, political, geographical and racial backgrounds. The diversity in the WNC's representation produced differences over several issues during the proceedings, challenging its uniting theme, which was based on understanding and acknowledging women's differences. I have shown in this study that differences over the use of English and opposition to the use of translators reflect poor

understanding of or regard for the various social backgrounds of the different women within the WNC.

Coming from different social and economic backgrounds, the goals and objectives that women identified as pre-eminent in promoting their rights and interests were influenced by their various social experiences within different contexts. Diani and della Porta (2006) have indicated that although individuals may participate in a social movement on the basis of collective identity and solidarity, their participation is driven by their social experiences or observations. As a result, different individuals within the social movement come with their own set of expectations that the organisation will address or provide solutions for their own specific set of issues.

Working-class women's priorities were derived from their experiences not only in society or the family, but also in the workplace as blue-collar workers. Issues like sexual harassment in the workplace, maternity leave and childcare rights were central in their demands for equality. COSATU women activists found that placing these issues on the agenda of the WNC was a challenge because of the different socio-economic status of women within the coalition. To achieve gains on maternity leave and childcare leave (after failing to gain support within the WNC coalition for these issues to be included in the Women's Charter), COSATU women ensured that these were included in the broader demands for workers' rights by the working-class movement and participated in protests for these demands to be recognised by the government and employers. Being autonomous, not bound to the dominant ANCWL, COSATU women occupied a strategic position in influencing the representation of women workers' rights during the negotiations for a democratic South Africa.

Transition processes have been greatly criticized for their elitist and exclusionist tendencies (see Waylen 2007a; Hassim 2006 for instance). The South African transition process has been hailed as different, in that working class organizations like the trade union movement (Adler and Webster 1995) and women's organizations took part in this process (Waylen 2007a and Hassim 2006 for instance). This study shows that even though women, a group that is often marginalized during transition processes, had a significant role in the South African transition, elitist and exclusionary tendencies were also to be found within the WNC.

COSATU women activists who were part of the WNC proceedings reported their dissatisfaction with the elitist and exclusionist practices of the WNC. They complained about the participation of intellectuals and researchers who had no constituencies, but were influencing the debates in the WNC. Women activists from COSATU were dissatisfied with the dominance of the elite processes, the discussions and debates conducted in 'small committees' as opposed to open

debates, propositions made without mandates and decisions taken without proper consultations: such practices excluded the majority of unemployed and unorganised women. The key to this contention was their concerns about the outcomes of these debates or discussions and the extent to which the content of the Women's Charter would reflect the aspirations of working class women.

## COSATU women and the feminist perspective

The Women's Charter is one of the most progressive documents in advancing women's rights in South Africa. The Women's Charter addresses gender equality and protection of women's rights in areas such as law and the administration of justice, the economy, education and training, family life and partnerships, access to healthcare and violence against women. I have demonstrated in chapters three and seven some of the campaigns or struggles that have been undertaken by gender activists within the unions that have addressed similar issues raised in the Women's Charter (see appendix two for the Charter). The demands raised in the Charter reflect trade union women's broad experiences and struggles for gender equality.

The WNC discourse on women's rights and gender equality therefore was not necessarily new or a product of the transition period. The transition period and the WNC helped put these issues in the public arena for national debates. It offered women opportunities to mobilise collectively on a much wider scale and to consolidate their demands. The strength of their collective solidarity and the rights-based discourse that dominated South Africa at the time gave women a persuasive argument when insisting on gender equality in a newly democratised society.

The role of the labour movement, particularly that of gender activists within trade unions has not been given significant consideration in the assessment of the feminist demands contained in the Charter and achievements of the WNC. Hassim (2006) for instance has conducted a detailed study on political women's organisations (UWO, NOW and FEDTRAW) and the ANCWL and the objections raised by women in opposition to gender inequities. In her analysis of the WNC, much emphasis is placed on the role of the ANCWL as the leading organisation for working-class women. Similarly, other analysts like Waylen (2007a, 2007b), Seidman (1999), and Cock (1997) have highlighted the critical contribution of the political 'elite,' particularly women coming back from exile who have been influenced by international feminist debates and who also had access to the political leadership of the ANC.

The focus on the gender struggles of women within trade unions and their involvement in the WNC challenges the notion that the outcomes of the WNC

were influenced mainly by the intellectual and political elites. Contrary to Cock (1997) and Seidman's (1999) suggestions that feminist struggles and debates emerged during the transition process, this study shows that women activists within trade unions did engage in feminist issues, even though they remained sceptical of the feminist movement. In line with the conclusions of this study, McBride and Mazur (forthcoming), Ferree (2006) challenge the notion that individuals or groups that reject feminist labels do not have a feminist agenda (see chapter two). This study's detailed analysis of the gender struggles and campaigns for gender equity within the labour movement furthers our understanding of the shaping of the public debates on gender equity during the transition period and the tensions within the WNC.

## Gender equality in democratic South Africa

The Women's Charter is an important document in terms of advancing women's rights in the country. Women utilised this document to influence the drafting of the Constitution and as a result have made considerable gains for the protection and advancement of women's rights. Women's rights are guaranteed in the constitution of the country, which is the highest level of protection. This means that women have legal recourse (for instance the constitutional court or equality court, and even the gender commission that has been established with the aim of protecting and promoting the rights of women in society) to challenge interference with these rights.

However, taken from the experiences of women within the trade unions, this study shows that democratic practices or principles and declarations made under its auspices often promote the rights and interests of selected sections of the population, mainly men. The drafting of legislation and adoption of gender sensitive policies alone are not sufficient. That does not translate directly to full adherence to the principles of gender equality and promotion of women's rights. What this research demonstrates is that transformation is impossible without changing leadership in key structures and addressing prevalent attitudes that are resistant to ideas of gender equity. It is critical that the union movement puts pressure particularly on the leadership to adopt and implement measures to address gender inequities. The union leadership needs to be held accountable by the labour movement on issues of gender equity.

Trade union movement reflects the society of its roots. In fact, the patriarchal attitudes observed within the labour movement indicate the cultural norms and practices on issues of gender equality within South African society. Even though South Africa has the most progressive constitution on gender equity, some men within society, those with traditional and patriarchal mindsets, are pulling in the

opposite direction. On the one hand, the legislation promotes gender equity, while on the other hand strong forces (mostly men) within key institutional structures with regressive practices, are strongly opposed to women's right to equality. Like trade unions, key institutions of society, which are meant to ensure successful implementation of gender sensitive policies, are still male hegemony (for instance the judicial system, labour markets and the government departments that are meant to administer services to women). Instances of continued gender discrimination within the workplace have been reported in the research. Employers still prefer employing men to women and gender discrimination in wages is still prevalent.

What this study shows is that in spite of their achievements, women still face major battles in the full realisation of their rights and gender equity. Gender representation is still limited: strong commitment from the key players in public institutions is still lacking. The main challenge facing the South African society, and women activists in particular, is moving from a theoretical position (policy level) of equal rights and gender equity to a practical situation (implementation phase) where ordinary women can enjoy full access to these rights.

### Suggestions for further research

- Gender and race within the workplace and the labour movement still remains an area that needs detailed research. Since this research focused solely on African women, it has documented only the experiences and views of this group. In order to gain a broader understanding of race and gender issues, we need to probe further into the experiences of women from different race groups. What were the different experiences of women in the workplace under apartheid? How did women of other racial groupings address issues of gender discrimination?
- Post apartheid South African workplaces have inherited apartheid's racial structure or hierarchy. The African majority still dominates the blue-collar occupations, while only a few have progressed into the middle-management categories. It would be useful to explore the gender and race relations within the middle-management categories (i.e. the white women and the few African women who have broken through into these new categories). What do these women have in common? To what extent can this common ground be transformed into shared or common interests and collective gender identity? Can these commonalities be effective in initiating a collective opposition to issues of gender inequity and discrimination of women at the middle-management level?

- Women are estimated to be almost half of COSATU membership (see chapter three), which is a significant representation. I have already alluded to some of developments that may have been influenced by this significant shift (for instance the growing influence of women within the labour movement and the widening space for gender debates). However, detailed research needs to be conducted to assess the implications of the growth of women membership on the labour movement and its agenda on women. What kind of gender politics or struggles are we likely to observe in the future as a result of this change?



# Appendix 1

## List of Interviewees

### *CCEPPWAWU*

Gertrude Mabiletsa

Elizabeth Thabethe

Joyce Pekani

Maud Khumalo

Themba Kgasi

### *NUMSA*

Maggie Magubane

Selina Tyikwe

Nomasonto Rosa Mkhize

Thembi Nabe

Rain Chiya

### *SSACAWU*

Patricia Khumalo

Patricia Appolis

Thembi Masondo

Thembi Motlhamme

Alina Rantsolase

Miriam Khumalo

Emma Mashinini

### *SACTWU*

Louisa Modikwe

Lorna Motshoahae

Violet Seboni

Faith Modise

Busisiwe Msimango

### *SATAWU*

Sibongile Masangwane

Veronica Mesatywa

Hilda Matjee

Leah Marumo

Lydia Kompe

*Additional Interviews*

Jane Barret

Mathapelo Makgoba

Mummy Jafta (COSATU gender coordinator)

Rachmat Omar

*Interviews not cited in the thesis*

Chris Bonner

Nomvula Nxumalo

Shamim Meer

Jeremy Daphne

Ruth Matotong

Dorothy Mbele

Kgomotso Mashe

## Appendix 2

### The Women's Charter for Effective Equality

(This is the second draft Charter drawn up through the National Women's Coalition structures, and approved at the National Conference on 27 February 1994)

*Preamble:*

As women, citizens of South Africa, we are here to claim our rights. We want recognition and respect for the work we do in the home, in the workplace and in the community. We claim full and equal participation in the creation of a non-sexist, non-racist democratic society.

We cannot march on one leg or clap with one hand. South Africa is poorer politically, economically, and socially for having prevented more than half of its people from fully contributing to its development.

Recognizing our shared oppression, women are committed to seizing this historic moment to ensure effective equality in a new South Africa.

For decades, patriarchy, colonialism, racism and apartheid have subordinated and oppressed women within political, economic and social life.

At the heart of women's marginalisation is the patriarchal order that confines women to the domestic arena and reserves for men the arena where political power and authority reside. Conventionally, democracy and human rights have been defined and interpreted in terms of men's experiences. Society has been organised and its institutions structured for the primary benefit of men.

Women want to control their lives. We bear important responsibilities but lack the authority to make decisions in the home and in society.

We want shared responsibility and decision-making in the home and effective equality in politics, the law, and in the economy. For too long women have been marginalised, ignored, exploited and are the poorest and most disadvantaged of South Africans.

If democracy and human rights are to be meaningful for women, they must address our historic subordination and oppression. Women must participate in, and shape the nature and form of our democracy.

As women we have come together in a coalition of organisations and engaged in a campaign that has enabled women to draw on their experience and define what changes are needed within the new political, legal, economic and social system.

The development of the potential of all our people, women and men, will enrich and benefit the whole of society.

We set out here a program for equality in all spheres of our lives, including the law, the economy, education, development and infrastructure, political and civic life, family life and partnerships, custom, culture and religion, health and the media.

#### *Article 1: Equality*

Equality underlies all our claims in this Charter. We recognise that the achievement of social, economic, political and legal equality is indivisible. Our struggle for equality involves the recognition of the disadvantage that women suffer in all spheres of our lives. As a result similar treatment of women and men may not result in true equality. Therefore the promotion of true equality will sometimes require distinctions to be made. No distinction, however, should be made that will disadvantage women. Within this context programs of affirmative action may be a means of achieving equality. We demand that equality applies to every aspect of our lives, including the family, the workplace and the state. The right to equality shall not be limited to our relationship with the state.

- The principle of equality shall be embodied at all levels in legislation and government policy. Specific legislation shall be introduced to ensure the practical realisation of equality.
- The state shall establish appropriate institutions to ensure the effective protection and promotion of equality for women. These institutions shall be accessible to all women in South Africa.

#### *Article 2: Law and the Administration of Justice*

Women demand equality in the development, application, adjudication, interpretation and enforcement of the law. This can only be achieved if the social, economic and political position of women is taken into account in deciding policy, determining legislative priorities, and in formulating, applying, interpreting, adjudicating and enforcing all laws.

- At all times the law, and its application, interpretation, adjudication and enforcement, shall promote and ensure the practical realisation of equality for women.
- There shall be equality in the treatment of women in all-legal and quasi-legal proceedings.
- Women shall have equal legal status and capacity in civil law, including, amongst others, full contractual rights, the right to acquire and hold rights in property, the right to equal inheritance and the right to secure credit.
- All public and private institutions shall enable women to exercise their legal capacity.

- Positive and practical measures shall be taken to ensure equality for women complainants in the criminal justice system.
- There shall be equality for women offenders.
- There shall be equality for women in the legal profession.
- Women shall be equally represented on, and participate in the selection of, the constitutional court, the judiciary, the magistracy, all tribunals and commissions, including the Human Rights Commission, and in the Department of Justice.
- There shall be educational programmes to address gender bias and stereotypes and to promote equality for women in the legal system.
- Women shall have equal representation on, and participation in all traditional courts, alternative dispute resolution mechanisms and local community courts.
- There shall be accessible and affordable legal services for women. In particular the position of paralegals in assisting women to claim their rights shall be recognized.

### *Article 3: Economy*

Conventional definitions of the economy do not include a major proportion of the work performed by women. The key sectors of the South African economy are occupied and dominated by men. Women face social, economic and ideological barriers to full and equal participation in the economy. Women are perceived in terms of their domestic and reproductive role. Women participate in large numbers in sectors of the economy, which are characterised by low wages and poor working conditions. Low remuneration is worsened by discrimination against women in the receipt of social benefits. As a result, many women are forced to make a living outside the formal economy.

- Gender stereotyping and the categorisation of jobs on the basis of sex and gender, must be eliminated.
- Equal benefits must be provided including housing, pensions and medical aid, amongst others.
- There should be no discriminatory taxation. All dependents supported by women breadwinners should be recognised for tax deductions for women.
- Legal mechanisms are needed to protect women against unfair, monopolistic and other exploitative business practices that affect women's participation in the informal economy.
- Safe and healthy facilities must be provided for women in the informal sector.
- Women must be protected from sexual harassment and violence in all the places where women are working.
- Group benefits are needed for women outside formal employment, such as accident and disability insurance, group housing schemes, sick leave and maternity benefits.
- Women need access to credit, which is not based on the need for collateral or linked to their marital status.
- Health and safety for commercial sex workers and their clients are needed. Prostitution should be decriminalised.
- Economic policy must secure a central place for women in the economy.

- The full participation of women in economic decision-making should be facilitated.
- The definition of what constitutes economic activity must include all women's work.
- Unpaid labour should be recognised as contributing to the creation of national wealth and should be included in the national accounts.
- Gender stereotyping of work in the home needs to be combated.

#### *Article 4: Education and Training*

Education and training in South Africa has historically focused on schooling, higher education and vocational training in the workplace. It has been male oriented, inaccessible, inappropriate and racially discriminatory. It has ignored women's needs and experience. Education and training is a continuous lifelong process. Education includes edu-care, adult basic and continuing education, primary, secondary and tertiary education and vocational training for the formal and informal economy. Education and training must meet the economic, social, cultural and political needs of women in South Africa.

- Every woman shall have the right to education and training at any stage of her life in order to realise her full potential.
- Every person has the right to equality within education irrespective of sex, gender, pregnancy, race, sexual orientation, age, disability, urban or rural location, domestic and child care responsibilities and financial status.
- Accessible and appropriate institutions shall be established to provide education to enable active participation by women, particularly rural women, single mothers, and disabled women.
- There shall be no negative gender stereotyping in both curriculum development and educational practice.
- Women shall be represented at all levels of the policy-making, management and administration of education and training.
- Women shall have special access to funds for education and training.
- Childcare facilities shall be provided at all education and training institutions.
- Human rights education to develop awareness of women's status, to build women's self confidence, and enable them to claim their constitutional and legal rights should be implemented.
- Girls and women in educational institutions must be protected against sexual harassment and abuse.
- Sex education shall be provided for boys and girls at all levels of schooling.

#### *Article 5: Development, Infrastructure and the Environment*

Women are primarily responsible for maintaining the household and the community. The majority of South Africans have been denied access to the full range of basic development resources and services necessary to sustain a healthy and productive life. Rural women and informal settlement residents in particular have been denied vital resources. The gradual destruction of the natural environment soil

erosion, deforestation and air pollution increases women's household, agricultural and community work responsibilities.

- Women should participate in designing and implementing development programs to meet their needs.
- Employment generated from development and infrastructure programs should benefit women.
- Adequate, accessible and safe water supplies and sanitation should be made available to all communities, including those in rural areas and informal settlements.
- Services such as communications and electricity or other appropriate sources of energy must be extended to all communities as a matter of priority.
- Women need safe transport networks.
- Women need affordable and secure housing with non-discriminatory subsidies and loans.
- Women must have equal access to land and security of tenure, including women living under customary law.
- Accessible health care, recreational, educational and social welfare facilities should be provided to women.
- There shall be protection of natural resources to benefit women.

#### *Article 6: Social Services*

Social services should be a right and not a privilege. Inadequate social services place the burden for providing these on women, since women are primarily responsible for maintaining the household and the community.

- Social welfare services should be provided by both the state and the private sector in accordance with the principles of social justice, equality, appropriateness and accessibility.
- Social services should apply to all areas of women's lives, in particular in the home, the workplace, health and education.
- The system of social services should pay special attention to the needs of rural and disabled women.
- State pensions should be provided to all women on an equal basis.
- Accessible and affordable social services should be provided to women.

#### *Article 7: Political and Civic Life*

Women have traditionally been excluded from participation and decision-making in political, civic and community life. Democracy requires that the political playing field between men and women be levelled by acknowledging women's right to participate equally in all political activities.

- Women shall have equal opportunity and access to leadership and decision-making positions at all levels of government.
- Rural women have the right to be part of decision-making structures in traditional communities.

- Women shall have equal access to, and representation on, public bodies.
- Traditional institutions shall be restructured in accordance with the principles of equality and democracy.
- There shall be adequate and appropriate support services to facilitate the full political participation of women.
- Women shall have the right to acquire, change or retain their nationality and to pass it on to their children.
- Women shall be free from political intimidation and threat to her person.

#### *Article 8: Family life and Partnerships*

There are many different types of families, which have not enjoyed the same rights, duties and benefits. Women bear an unequal burden in maintaining the family and yet have little power to make decisions.

- All family types shall be recognised and treated equally.
- Women shall have equality within the family and within marriages and intimate relationships.
- Women shall have the right to choose the partner of their choice.
- Women shall have equal rights during, and at the dissolution of, a marriage.
- Women married under customary law shall have the right to inherit from their husbands.
- Women must have the right to decide on the nature and frequency of sexual contact within marriage and intimate relationships.
- Partners and all members of the household should endeavour to share domestic responsibilities.
- Women should have equal access to the financial resources of the household.
- Women should have equal decision-making powers and access to information with regard to the economic management of the household.
- The integrity of the partnership has to be maintained without external and familial interference, except where physical, sexual and emotional abuse occurs.
- Women shall have guardianship over their children.
- Women shall have adequate, effective and enforceable maintenance and/or social welfare benefits for themselves and their children.

#### *Article 9: Custom, Culture and Religion*

Customary, cultural and religious practice frequently subordinates women. Roles that are defined for women are both stereotypical and restrictive. Women are often excluded from full participation, leadership and decision-making in religious and cultural practice.

- Custom, culture and religion shall be subject to the equality clause in the Bill of Rights.
- All women shall have the freedom to practice their own religion, culture or beliefs without fear.

#### *Article 10: Violence Against Women*

Violence in all its forms is endemic to South African society. Both sexual and domestic violence are pervasive and all women live under the threat of or experience violence. Women experience secondary victimisation at all stages of the criminal justice system.

- Women shall be entitled to security and integrity of the person which shall include the right to be free from all forms of violence in the home, in communities, in the workplace and in public spaces.
- The state should be responsible for public education about the dignity and integrity of the person.
- There shall be legal protection for all women against sexual and racial harassment, abuse and assault.
- Facilities staffed by trained personnel where women can report cases of rape, battery and sexual assault, undergo medical examination and receive appropriate treatment and counselling shall be provided.
- Appropriate education and training for police, prosecutors, magistrates, judges, district surgeons and other persons involved in dealing with cases of rape, battery, sexual assault and incest must be provided.
- There shall be accessible and affordable shelters and counselling services for survivors of rape, battery and sexual assault.

#### *Article 11: Health*

Health services in South Africa have traditionally been unequal, inaccessible and inappropriate. Women in particular are unaware of their rights in relation to health services. Health Services have not been appropriately oriented to meet women's health needs and priorities. The lack of basic life sustaining services, such as water and sanitation, has denied the majority of South Africans access to the resources necessary to ensure good health.

- Equal, affordable and accessible health care services which meet women's specific health needs shall be provided.
- Women have the right to control over their bodies, which includes the right to reproductive decisions.
- Access to information and knowledge to enable women to make informed choices about their bodies and about health care should be provided.
- Education about family planning and family planning services should be provided free of charge to both men and women.
- Every person shall have access to adequate nutrition.
- Appropriate and accessible mental health care services must be provided to women.

#### *Article 12: Media*

In South Africa women do not enjoy equal access to, or coverage in the film, print and electronic media. Very few women own or control media institutions or occupy executive or editorial decision-making positions. Women are marginalised and trivialised in the media. The principles of freedom of speech and the press should not justify the portrayal of women in a manner that is degrading and humiliating or promotes violence against them.

- Women must have equal access to all media and media institutions.
- The contribution of women in all areas of public and private life must be reflected in the media.
- The promotion of equality, including affirmative action, in employment must redress current imbalances in the status of women in the media.
- There is a need to monitor the representation of women in the media.
- Negative or injurious stereotypes of women must be eliminated.

This Charter gives expression to the common experiences, visions and aspirations of South African women. We are breaking our silence. We call for respect and recognition of our human dignity and for a genuine change in our status and material conditions in a future South Africa.

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## Samenvatting

Deze studie onderzoekt de mobilisering van Zuid-Afrikaanse vrouwen in vakbondsactiviteiten in de periode tussen 1973 en 2003. Het onderzoek onderstreept de rol van Zuid-Afrikaanse vrouwen in de strijd voor rechten van arbeiders op het werk en hun bijdragen in de opbouw van de arbeidersbeweging. Het toont aan dat vrouwen initiatieven hebben genomen in de mobilisering van arbeiders en de organisatie van de vakbeweging binnen verschillende sectoren. Onderzoekers van de arbeidersbeweging, met name binnen de Zuid-Afrikaanse context, besteden weinig aandacht aan de betrokkenheid van vrouwen in vakbewegingsactiviteiten en hun bijdragen binnen deze organisaties. Dit onderzoek stelt echter dat Zuid-Afrikaanse vrouwen op de voorgrond hebben gestaan van arbeidersdebatten op het werk. Zij hebben een cruciale rol gespeeld in het ontwikkelen en beschermen van rechten van arbeiders.

De sociale achtergrond of levensloop van de geïnterviewde vakbondsactivistes is belangrijk om hun deelname aan de vakbeweging te verklaren. De verschillende contexten, zoals de maatschappij, familie, werkplaats en vakbeweging, waarin individuen zijn verankerd zijn van belang. Ik betoog dat de ervaringen en observaties van individuen binnen deze verschillende contexten essentieel zijn om hun gedrag en motivaties te begrijpen. Uit deze studie blijkt dat de mobilisering en het activisme van vrouwen in vakbewegingen niet alleen te verklaren valt uit de ervaringen op het werk.

Lonen en slechte werkomstandigheden zijn typische factoren die genoemd worden als verklaringen voor arbeidsgeschillen en voor de mobilisatie in de vakbeweging. Deze factoren blijken inderdaad van belang te zijn voor veel van de geïnterviewde vrouwen. De politieke context is echter ook belangrijk voor het vormen van hun klassenbewustzijn als arbeidsters. Het apartheidsregime en het overheersen van rassendiscriminatie en uitbuiting van zwarte mensen in de maatschappij en op het werk blijken centraal te staan in de mobilisering van vele van de geïnterviewde vrouwen. Deze studie toont ook aan dat de zwarte identiteit het belangrijkste was in de ontwikkeling van een solide klassenbewustzijn van vrouwen en mannen gedurende het apartheidstijdperk.

Het ervaren van seksediscriminatie op het werk en binnen de maatschappij is tevens van belang in het verklaren van de mobilisering en het activisme van vrouwen binnen de vakbond. Ik heb in deze studie aangetoond dat het gebrek aan rechten met betrekking tot het moederschap, seksuele intimidatie en ongelijke betaling enkele van de onderwerpen zijn die de betrokkenheid van vrouwen in vakbonden hebben beïnvloed. De strijd van vrouwen op het werk bewijst dat

arbeidersklassepolitiek lage lonen en slechte arbeidsomstandigheden te boven gaat. Het percentage vrouwen van de beroepsbevolking en de leden van de vakbeweging trekt onze conceptualisering van de arbeidersklasse en de sociaal-economische strijd in twijfel. De eisen van vrouwen voor seksegelijkheid noodzaken werkgevers, vakbonden en zelfs onderzoekers om sekse-issues op te nemen in de definitie van arbeidsvoorwaarden.

Vrouwelijke activisten hebben sinds de vroege jaren '80 de uitsluiting bevochten van vrouwenissues van de agenda van de arbeidersbeweging. In 1983 organiseerden vrouwen informele vrouwenfora, die zij gebruikten om een collectieve sekse-identiteit en solidariteit te ontwikkelen door discussies over specifieke vrouwenissues en ervaringen van vrouwen op verschillende terreinen zoals het gezin, de werkplek en de vakbeweging. Zij hebben deze fora gebruikt om strategieën te ontwikkelen om de prioritering van de doelen van de vakbeweging aan te vechten en om te eisen dat seksediscriminatie de volle aandacht zou krijgen. Door middel van de vrouwenfora hebben vrouwenactiviteiten de vakbonden uitgedaagd om resoluties aan te nemen en beleid te ontwikkelen dat seksegelijkheid aanpakt.

In tegenstelling tot beweringen dat Afrikaans vrouwenactivisme gedurende de vroege jaren '80 conservatief was en de patriarchale sekseverhoudingen niet ter discussie stelde, beargumenteert deze studie dat deze strijd een belangrijk onderdeel vormde van het activisme van vrouwen gedurende deze periode. De studie toont ook aan dat vrouwelijke activisten eisen stelden over veranderingen in de leiderschapsstructuur van de arbeidersbeweging. Ondanks de sterke mannelijke oppositie binnen de vakbonden zijn vrouwen erin geslaagd bonden te dwingen vrouwenissues op de agenda te zetten en te bespreken op nationale congressen, om zo recht te doen aan de gezamenlijke ervaringen van vrouwelijke arbeiders. De conflicten over de agenda en doelen van een sociale beweging weerspiegelen het eenzijdig mannelijke karakter van de vakbeweging. De verschillende sekse-identiteiten van vakbondsleden hebben grote invloed op hun besluiten en doelen.

Activisme tegen sekseongelijkheid wordt beïnvloedt door seksebewustzijn of het beseffen van seksediscriminatie. Seksebewustzijn ontwikkelt zich door een reeks gebeurtenissen in de levensloop van vrouwen, zowel binnen het gezin als binnen de maatschappij. Sommige van deze ervaringen vinden plaats gedurende de vroege levensjaren en hebben voor een deel van de geïnterviewden een belangrijke invloed op hun visies en percepties op sekseverhoudingen. De meeste vrouwen in dit onderzoek verzetten zich tegen patriarchale dominantie binnen persoonlijke relaties. Terwijl sommigen binnen relaties blijven en mannelijke autoriteit of dominantie aankaarten, zijn sommigen zover gegaan hun man te verlaten of van hem te scheiden.

De Zuid-Afrikaanse transitie van apartheid naar democratie in de vroege jaren '90 verschilt in belangrijke mate van de transities in Latijns-Amerika en Midden- en Oost-Europa. In Zuid-Afrika hebben vrouwen de uitkomst van de onderhandelingen kunnen beïnvloeden en ervoor gezorgd dat resoluties over seksegelijkheid werden aangenomen. Via het Women's National Coalition (WNC) hebben Zuid-Afrikaanse vrouwen actief bijgedragen aan de democratische uitkomst van een postapartheid Zuid-Afrika. De formatie van het WNC had tot doel vrouwen bijeen te brengen in een brede coalitie en te verzekeren dat vrouwen met één stem zouden spreken om de invloed van vrouwen op het transitieproces te maximaliseren. Deze studie toont aan dat de ontwikkeling van het WNC echter moeizaam verliep vanwege de diversiteit van de deelnemende vrouwen en wie zij representeerden. Het WNC bestond uit vrouwen van verschillende economische, politieke, geografische en raciale achtergronden. Hun definitie van vrouwenonderwerpen en wat zij als prioriteit zagen, werd beïnvloed door deze achtergronden.

Het onderzoek laat ook zien wat vrouwen uit de arbeidersklasse hebben bijgedragen aan de uitkomst van het transitieproces. Terwijl andere wetenschappers de rol hebben benadrukt van 'elite' vrouwen, zoals intellectuelen, politici en bestuursleden van vrouwenorganisaties, toon ik aan dat vrouwen uit de arbeidersklasse ook significant hebben bijgedragen aan dit proces. Zij hebben ervoor gezorgd dat de belangen van arbeidersklasse vrouwen, in het bijzonder zwangerschapsverlof, recht op kinderopvang, en seksuele intimidatie, zijn opgenomen in de eisen voor vrouwenrechten. De representatie van vakbondsvrouwenactivisten binnen het WNC werd wederom beïnvloed door hun achtergrond en ervaringen.

Feminisme in Zuid-Afrika bleef gedurende de apartheid een zeer omstreden onderwerp. Veel vrouwenactivisten binnen de arbeidersbeweging identificeerden zich niet als feministen en verzetten zich tegen zulke tendensen. Deze studie toont echter aan dat de strijd van vrouwen binnen de arbeidersbeweging wel degelijk de ongelijke machtsrelaties tussen vrouwen en mannen aan de orde stelde. Vrouwen vochten voor de transformatie van ongelijke sekseverhoudingen op het werk en binnen de vakbeweging. Ook al identificeerden vrouwen zich dus niet met de feministische beweging, zij hielden zich wel bezig met typisch feministische strijdpunten. Dit onderzoek weerspreekt het idee dat het feministische discours dat werd gepropageerd tijdens de transitieperiode en op het WNC een recent fenomeen is. In plaats daarvan stel ik dat de geschillen van vrouwelijke arbeiders in de bonden en op het werk over gelijksoortige onderwerpen gingen.

Het succes van het WNC komt tot uiting in de grondwet van het land, die seksegelijkheid garandeert in alle sectoren van de Zuid-Afrikaanse maatschappij. De belangrijkste barrière voor Zuid-Afrikaanse vrouwen om deze rechten volledig te realiseren, is het gebrek aan transformatie binnen sleutelorganisaties en -instituten. Het aannemen van beleid en wetgeving is één stap in het bevorderen van de rechten van vrouwen en het promoten van seksegelijkheid. Uitvoering van beleid en het naleven van wetten is een volgend cruciaal stadium. Voor de vrouwen in de vakbeweging is de belangrijkste uitdaging de verandering van de leiderschapsstructuur van de vakbonden. De constitutionele overwinning van Zuid-Afrikaanse vrouwen zal evenmin kunnen worden gerealiseerd zonder strijd om de transformatie van het leiderschap van sleutelinstuties binnen de overheid en de maatschappij. Transformatie op dit niveau gaat niet alleen om het plaatsen van vrouwen in posities van besluitvorming- en uitvoering. Maar het betekent ook het veranderen van mannelijke attitudes, overtuigingen en waarden die vrouwen als minderwaardig beschouwen in de algemene maatschappij.

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## About the Author

Malehoko Tshoaedi was born in South Africa on 31 May 1975. She completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology and Psychology in 1997 at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. In 1997 she registered for her Honours degree in Industrial Sociology and was also appointed as a research intern at the Sociology of Work Programme based at the University of the Witwatersrand. During her internship programme she conducted independent research on women and trade unions. This research subsequently became the focus of her Masters Degree dissertation, which she completed in 1999.

Between 1999 and 2001 she worked as a researcher focusing on labour movements and labour markets in Southern Africa. In 2001 she was awarded the Leiden Mandela Scholarship to pursue her PhD. Since 2002 Tshoaedi has been at the Joke Smit Institute for Women's studies working with Prof. Joyce Outshoorn on her PhD dissertation. She has written and published on topics related to gender inequality in trade unions; labour movements in Southern Africa and labour markets in Southern Africa.