

Women in leadership

COSATU Vice President, Joyce Pekane, speaks to Shamim Meer about women's leadership in the labour movement.



Photo by COSATU Communications Dept.

SM: Tell us about your background.

JP: I started as a student activist in 1976 when I was 15. I got involved in a lot of organisations. In 1978 they came to detain me. My mother went to the Reverend Ngubeni of the Methodist Church, who contacted the South African Council of Churches and I was released. When the United Democratic Front (UDF) was formed, I joined.

After completing my Matric, I joined a company called Robertsons in Johannesburg as a part-time laboratory technician. I was given a permanent job in 1986.

There was no trade union at that time. They were still using liaison committees. So I looked for a union, with a comrade called Bafana Khumalo, who assisted me in getting that company organised. That was the former

CWIU. I have been a shopsteward since then.

The company told me that, as a laboratory technician, I was not allowed in the bargaining unit. I refused to be taken out of the bargaining unit and I refused to take the increase they wanted to give me. I said, "I'll remain at the grade that is covered by the bargaining unit".

SM: What were some of the major issues that you were taking up with management at that time?

JP: There was a lot of sexual harassment. Women had to sleep with the supervisors to get jobs. There were separate bathrooms for black and white workers. In the canteen, blacks sat on one side and whites on another. And management would call one worker and

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give him or her an increase as they pleased. We introduced the union and a recognition agreement was signed. Negotiations started and we made sure that everything changed.

SM: What positions did you hold?

JP: I've been a chairperson in the factory and a branch treasurer. I

was a women's worker co-ordinator and then I became national women's co-ordinator for the union. I motivated during the NEC for the employment of a full time gender co-ordinator, which was eventually agreed, though we had to ballot. In 1997, I was elected as the 1st Vice President of the former CWIU. I held this position up until the merger, which took place in February 1999. After the merger I was an ordinary shopsteward. I was actively involved in the AIDS campaign. I was elected 2nd Vice President of COSATU by the Special Congress in 1999. Last year, in September, I was re-elected until 2003. I am the only woman deputy president of OATUU – the Organisation of African Trade Unions Unity.

SM: What made you get involved in women's issues in the union?

JP: There were only a few women who were active in the CWIU. We would sit in our women's structures and empower and motivate. Those were the structures that empowered us to how advance our argument, how to counter questions.

SM: What are some of the challenges for gender forums today?

JP: The most important challenge is to really prepare women to be able to advance or debate issues that are affecting women and to lobby around women's issues. Today, women don't support one another like they did in the past. I guess that women nowadays think things are well for them. They need to understand that the few women that are in leadership positions are there through the struggle of women. There was no need for anybody to argue against the quota. Those very women who argue against it are sitting in gender forums.

SM: Why do you think the ANC has quotas, but COSATU and some of the affiliates are resisting them so strongly?

JP: The leadership of the federation and the affiliates don't agree with women's empowerment through quotas. Because they are sitting in powerful positions, they get women to argue against the quota. And the position is mostly adopted at NEC level, when there are very few women. If women are there, the men who don't want the quota still maintain the *status quo*. The ANC has a number of women in their high profile structures who can influence policy.

In the federation, women don't all have the same understanding of women's problems. Some women think that women's structures are a kitchen and that the real structures are the constitutional structures where politics are discussed. They don't think it is necessary for women to sit separately from men.

SM: How can we approach leadership in a way that ensures the link with membership and accountability? What is it that leaders are supposed to do to advance women's interests? And what are the interests of COSATU women today?

JP: Equality is definitely the most important one and equity is another. We think that the quota will make sure that there is equity. Women must be exposed. They need exposure at leadership level in order to understand how leadership is conducted.

SM: And the issue of sexual harassment?

JP: It is important for women, especially at the grassroots level, to understand and know their rights. Men now have a tendency of doing it jokingly – they still do it, but make out it is a joke.

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It is a problem in the union. But women don't want to speak out. If a staff member is being harassed by a male staff member, where is she going to report? Should she report to a gender co-ordinator? Does the gender co-ordinator have the skills to handle cases of sexual harassment and would she have the guts to face the men? What if it is her boss? And what if her job has not been confirmed? Will she confront the person?

SM: Do men give women a serious hearing when they speak at meetings or congresses?

JP: It is difficult, especially at federation level. In your affiliate, you know the rest of the office bearers, the culture of how they operate. The diversity comes at federation level, where you are an office bearer with leadership that comes from different affiliates with different cultures. Some of them are not used to having women office bearers. I once experienced a situation where a male comrade was giving us instructions. I said: "are you giving instructions, or are you making suggestions?" And someone said: "he is leading". I said: "I am also a leader. I was elected by the

same congress which elected him and he must give me respect".

SM: What needs to happen so that a democratic space is created for women to participate?

JP: Women should continue sensitising other women. You must also make sure that you get male comrades to understand how some of these things make you feel. Some of them do them innocently, thinking it's their right as men. They seem not to be agreeing to the new dispensation. They agree with everything else, except to recognise that women are

equal to men.

Gender co-ordinators are the ones who should sensitise women, because they have the opportunity of getting women together and getting them to talk and understand how to handle some of the things. They should also strategise in those meetings, that this issue is coming up and we would target those people who sit in those structures where we don't sit and tell them to advance our interests.

SM: What have the gender structures and co-ordinators achieved?

JP: The focus now is on looking at more women in constitutional structures and electing more women office bearers in affiliates. We now have two women in COSATU leadership – this is an achievement. But there is still a need for COSATU to change and have more women in leadership.

[Shamim Meer is currently involved in a project on "Women leadership and gender structures" at NALEDI]