

This book has been titled **Labour Pains** to reflect the intensity of the struggle for gender equality in the trade union movement and society. Women in labour carry the double burden of paid work and unpaid work in the home. Black working class women are oppressed as black people, as women and as workers. They also face a 'struggle within the struggle' as they are forced to confront sexism in their won unions as well as in the workplace and at home. The book explores the experiences of women leaders in the trade unions, and the strategies they use to deal with the challenges and the burdens they face. It also reflects on the strategies adopted by COSATU and some of its affiliates to advance gender equality and promote organizational change. While the book acknowledges that progress has been made on the development of policy for gendered change, it argues that little has been achieved in practice in terms of translating commitments into meaningful reality for working class women. The book argues that challenging unequal power between men and women in the unions and society does not happen simply through resolutions, policies and setting up structures – it happens through action and activism.

Working class women played an enormously significant role in the struggle for democracy in South Africa, a large number of them organized in trade unions. While they contributed to this struggle alongside their male comrades, women also waged a 'struggle within the struggle'. This was a struggle against the values and practices of a male-dominated and sexist system that saw their own comrades and partners express them as women. While many resolutions commit COSATU and its affiliates to gender equality, working class women continue to face oppression and inequality in the home, the workplace, the community and their unions today. While an important slogan of COSATU has been 'an injury to one is an injury to all', women workers continue to suffer injury in society that is not experienced by men, that is often inflicted by men, and that is not taken up by the democratic organizations that they belong to.

Democracy in South Africa - A Better Life for Working Class Women?

Through an assessment of the position of working class women post-1994, the first chapter of the book makes the argument that democracy has brought few advances for working class women in South Africa, as the macro-economic policy decisions of government have favoured the interests of big capital over those of the working class. The chapter also looks at the position of women in the trade union movement, and asks whether commitments made to gender equality and women's liberation by COSATU unions have been realised in practice. It goes on to ask why democracy has not brought with it gender equality and a better life for working class women. In doing this, it explores age-old theoretical approaches to the issue of women's oppression and gender inequality, such as the 'triple oppression' faced by black women, and unpaid labour. It shows how the exploitation of working class men is based on the oppression of working class women, and how, in South Africa, inequalities based on race and class intersect with gender inequality. In this way it shows why the

struggle for gender equality is a struggle that both men and women workers need to take up, and a struggle that is central to the struggle for socialism.

The end of apartheid promised a better life for all those who had been marginalised, discriminated against, and exploited by a system that enforced inequality on the basis of racial, ethnic, class, and gender differences. Women, and black women in particular, had suffered specific forms of oppression and exploitation that had helped to sustain the apartheid economy, and they had formed and joined organisations in struggle with men that had helped to secure a democratic future for the country. Democracy and its institutions promised a life for all women free from the marginalisation, discrimination, exclusion, harassment, violence, and fear that they had lived with under apartheid.

But, just over ten years into democracy little has changed in the lives of the majority of women - black, working class, and poor. The law, the constitution, and all institutions of the democratic state have changed very progressively to include women and issues relating to gender. However, little has been done to ensure that these commitments are met in practice for the majority. Under the sway of the global mantra of neo-liberalism, the most recent form of capitalism, the democratic state has not been able to avail the resources necessary for the kind of redress demanded by apartheid's legacy. Instead, it has opened up opportunities for the meeting of individual and private interests over those of communities and disadvantaged groups.

Democracy's commitments to addressing gender concerns and women's issues have allowed for a small group of women (middle-class, black and white) to ascend to positions of relative comfort and power in a society that continues to function on the logic of capitalism, a logic that is founded on a system of unequal relations between men and women, reflected in the gender division of labour in capitalist society. While an elite group of women has gained significant access to economic and political power through democracy, the large majority of women are increasingly being forced into more vulnerable and precarious positions in society. In addition, neo-liberalism has brought profound changes to the lives of men, which have also had effects on gender relations and the lives of women.

Learning from Past Struggles

In the second chapter, the book looks at the history of women in trade unions in South Africa. It describes the early days of union struggle in the 1940s and 1950s, the mass mobilisation and strikes of the 1970s and 1980s, and the post-apartheid period from the mid-1990s. It looks closely at the role that women and the struggle for gender equality have played in each of these periods. It shows that while a lot is different in each of these periods, there is also a lot that is the same. In particular, it looks at the experiences of women in all these periods of oppression and exploitation as they continue in the home, the workplace, the union, and society more generally. The chapter explores some of the challenges that women faced, issues they took up, and how they made their voices heard.

To take one example from the book to illustrate this point, in 1992 Maggie Magubane, who had been in the union movement for sixteen years, lashed out angrily at sexism in the unions: “How much longer are women going to be seen as minors?” she asked. “At every trade union congress resolutions are passed saying the union will fight all forms of discrimination and promote the participation and leadership by women. These resolutions are never put in practice. Afterwards we have to listen to male comrades saying there is no way they can be led by women. We have to listen to shopstewards insisting women can’t be elected as office bearers – it is against tradition. Despite the resolutions taken there are still union organisers who believe it is your duty as a woman to make tea for him in the office. In meetings women’s views are not taken seriously. Sometimes you find when a woman stands up to talk, the men will make funny remarks or whistle at her before she even opens her mouth. Many women won’t talk at a meeting because of this. When a woman does raise a point she is often ignored. But if later in the discussion a male comrade makes the same point the meeting will applaud him. When you look at all the work done by women – in the home and in the workplace you see how much we contribute. The men are seen as heroes, but often it is thanks to women that they get this recognition. As a concerned woman I ask myself ‘is it worthwhile for women to attend meetings when our views are not considered?’ Are we in the trade union movement really striving for liberation? If so when are we going to change this tradition business? Customs are only beliefs. We need to create new traditions and customs if we are serious about building a truly new South Africa”.¹

Our aim, in this chapter, is for women and men who are active in trade unions to learn from the experiences of the past, and to find ways of changing traditions, practices and beliefs that keep men and women in their unequal positions in all spheres of society today.

Through the eyes of women leaders

The third chapter is made up of the experiences of a few of the women leaders in unions today. These experiences speak to the problems faced by women worker leaders in their homes, in their communities, in their workplaces, and in their unions. The chapter looks at these different experiences, and at how the oppression of women in each of these spheres is linked. For most successful women leaders, developing ways of dealing with male dominance and superiority and forcing gender onto an otherwise very male union agenda requires tenacity and creativity. Through the stories of women union leaders, this chapter is able to give practical meaning to the theoretical concepts explored in Chapter 1 of the book. Chapter Three also records and celebrates the achievements of these few women leaders, whose example itself is a contribution to the struggle for recognition of women's leadership in the union movement.

¹ SPEAK 40 1992.

From the experiences of the women we interviewed, it is clear that women's experiences outside the union affect the challenges they face in taking up leadership positions. Many spoke of the negative effect years of schooling, religious teachings, and practice of traditions and customs have had on their own gendered approaches to life in the union, and in general. Many of the women interviewed highlighted how society's deep-seated prejudices against women in certain roles and leadership positions continuously manifest in all aspects of the lives of women workers. At times, women hold the very beliefs that prevent their own progress, this is known as internalised oppression. As one SACTWU shop steward noted: "These beliefs are so deep rooted that even female comrades still believe that because I am a woman I can't do this and that. Because men always tell you 'God made women to be inferior'. There is nothing of the sort in the bible. But there's that thinking."

In many cases, where women choose to be active in their unions, they do this against a lot of pressure to conform to the accepted roles for women in society from the people closest to them, their male partners in the home and in the union. This is made worse by the fact that a number of women still believe that it is their duty to perform certain roles in the home in order to be good wives, mothers, and women.

When a woman worker leader's husband paid lobola he laid down that she must stop her union activities. She says "... it was very difficult for me to adapt to such conditions and so we had to part ways. He met me when I was in the trade union. He behaved or pretended as if he understood, but when he paid lobola he changed colour, he became a chameleon. Saying that under no circumstances are you leaving on Sunday morning to attend meetings. And it was very difficult. I had to sit with him, explain but he didn't want to understand. And then, I had to tell him 'under no circumstances, we'll have to part ways', which we did. I had to make a choice of ensuring I protect and serve the members, because it is very important for me. I am what I am today because of the trade union. I understand everything outside because of the trade union." While trade union activism has presented women workers with many challenging and problematic situations, it has also often been a way for women to overcome their oppression and gain the confidence to change their lives.

For the women interviewed, domestic violence is one of the major problems faced by women in trade unions. The SACTWU Western Cape regional secretary stated that domestic violence is a huge problem amongst members: "In our region the majority of our members are exposed to domestic violence. A lot of the women, when you meet them in the factory, they put up this front, a very brave front, but after dark they face the horrors of real life out there. When they get home, they have to take care of the kids and clean up the place, hoping their husband will be sober. A lot of them are physically and verbally abused and then they have to be at work the next day, where they face more abuse. Sometimes I sit in awe of them and wonder how they manage to get through a single day,

other than a year of being employed.”

A few of the women we interviewed were brave enough to speak about their own experiences of domestic violence and their struggles to deal with this. One woman leader spoke of how hard it was to live in a violent relationship and feel unable to leave: "I must say that I was a victim of that, even though I was a trade unionist. I was in a relationship for almost nine years and I was so abused but...I felt so trapped I couldn't get out until there was a final blow that almost killed me. I was hospitalised for the weekend and that was it. As much as I, being a trade unionist, should be able to deal with these issues I was unable to deal with it within my own personal circumstances. I would conduct workshops talking about the maintenance law, domestic violence, the interdict process, your right to maintenance....I couldn't do it for myself when I was in that situation for years, and it was very difficult."

The experiences of the women interviewed were peppered with examples of sexual harassment and abuse. For example, a worker leader spoke of sexual harassment at her workplace: "Female workers were resigning at work because of that. I explained to them after I went on this workshop that it is sexual harassment that they are experiencing. Then they realised. They know now that they can lodge a grievance and they are no longer afraid to stand for themselves. So the situation has improved. It wasn't the senior managers, it was the supervisors and co-workers that were doing that. What they do, they will say I love you and if you don't love me then I will make your work very difficult. They won't say I'll dismiss you because they don't have the power to do that but they can make your life at work very difficult. Those women were wanting to resign even knowing that jobs are so scarce."

A woman's place is in the union?

Women worker leaders also experience resistance and sexism from male comrades and union members that they work alongside with. They often have to battle for their leadership ability to be recognised and accepted because of widespread patriarchal attitudes. A NUMSA shopsteward told us of her experience in a majority male factory, in a mainly male union. She feels that the male workers have mixed feelings about her. They recognise her leadership qualities and have elected her for four terms running. At the same time, they see her differently because she is a woman. She spoke of the difficulties she faces as a woman shopsteward in a male environment. This is partly because of the men's attitudes but also because of her feelings about herself.

"It was very difficult when I started [being a shopsteward]. Most of the men in that company are coming from the hostel. They believe in custom and culture. Whenever I talk or stand in front of them, they believe what I say. But afterwards they say 'hey what she says might be true but because she is a woman, we can't support her'."

She spoke about how she overcame her anxiety in the face of men's negative attitudes to women leaders: "When I stood up I was shaking because every time when I stand up they would say 'Oh this woman, umfazi, what is she going to say?' But they would try to listen because they were interested in the union. The only problem was that it was a woman standing in front of them. I tried to be very strong. When I am shaking I started by singing, to make them toyi toyi. When you are scared to talk, if you start by singing your fear goes away. You try by toyi toying, you make them to be warm and after that they become happy and sit down and listen to you." She said it had taken a long time to win the men's trust. But now they know that they can rely on her to attend meetings and report back to them.

Other women leaders spoke of being left out of decisions and having to fight for information to be given to them by their fellow office bearers. They spoke of an environment where they had to constantly prove themselves against negative assumptions that they would fail. While some women said that they had had a lot of support from male comrades, others said that there was a lack of willingness to support them. For instance, one woman shop steward said that their contributions in meetings were often dismissed because of the patriarchal belief that women do not have a useful political contribution to make. She said that a lot of women do not speak because men call them out of order: "Most of us women we lack confidence. I remember saying I'm tired of being out of order. Why can't I be in order once, because the male comrades like calling us out of order, and then most of the women keep quiet after that because they're afraid to be called out of order. And then I said the male comrades must clarify why we are out of order so that we can learn. Then they used to start saying she'll need clarity if you call her out of order. I think if you speak openly you gain respect."

The book explores a number of examples of strategies that women have used to overcome these difficulties.

Assessing Gender Strategies in COSATU

The fourth chapter looks at some of the strategies that COSATU has adopted over the years with regard to realising its commitments to women's emancipation and gender equality. It offers an assessment of them in terms of the actual impact that they have had on the position of women in the unions, and through lived experiences in specific unions. It contains case studies through which different strategic choices made by these unions are evaluated in terms of their effects on gender relations and the position of women. This chapter aims to give an overview of the major strategic differences within the union movement with regard to gender, and the pros and cons of these various strategies through particular experiences of them in action.

Strategies for Change

The fifth chapter pulls together the lessons revealed in the previous chapters, drawing from them strategies for advancing the struggle for women's liberation and the transformation of gender relations in our time. In particular, it makes suggestions for ways of approaching the implementation of certain policy commitments through an assessment of the experiences of the previous chapters in terms of their impact on the position of working class women in trade unions in South Africa today.

Some of the aspects of change necessary to advance gender transformation include the following:

- Shifting the strategic focus of COSATU and its affiliates from policy formulation and resolution drafting to more action and implementation
- There is a need for a radical change in the attitudes, values, beliefs, strategies and practices of unions and their members
- Making gender issues part of union daily work
- Empowering gender activists to engender all union activities
- Making resources available for gender work in unions
- Ensuring that gender structures and union meetings in general are geared up to activism and class struggle, rather than being caught up in bureaucratic procedures, which have the effect of blunting struggle
- Running dynamic and visible gender campaigns in workplaces
- Ensuring that organisational renewal processes in unions take on board the need to challenge patriarchal culture and practices in unions
- Support and solidarity for women leaders
- Developing male allies in the gender struggle
- Conscientising male workers and leaders about the negative effects of rigid gender roles in their own lives and the ways in which sexism is dehumanising to them
- Employment of women organisers
- Overcoming internalised oppression
- Linking workplace and community activism
- Building a working class-led women's movement
- Taking forward gender struggles as part of the struggle for socialism

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