

**We are convinced that our way of dealing with the gender issue in SACTWU has a lesson for other unions. Instead of side-lining women into separate structures, women need to be part of the mainstream of union life, and women/gender issues must feature actively on the agenda of all union structures**  
— *Rachel Visser, SACTWU Organiser*

**W**hen I became a union rep and started attending meetings, I knew nothing about the 'women's struggle' and labour issues.

I was elected as shopsteward at Ensign Clothing Factory in 1986 because I stood up and confronted management when they proposed a one day short time. I was very excited and eager to learn, and I have learnt the hard way.

Becoming a unionist opened my eyes. It was only then that I realised what immense problems the women of the world are facing. You constantly have to struggle to be twice as good as a man in order to prove you can do it.

Women are active in shopsteward committees all

over South African and all over the world. They have shown that they are committed to their trade unions and to their federations. But if you look at their representation on the structures of their trade unions and federations across the world they shine in their absence. Even in the day to day work of trade unions, women have difficulty taking on roles such as organisers.

Trade unions and federations all over the world have at last been forced to look at these issues. The most common solution has been to set up women's committees and separate structures for women. The question is: did that help?

I have been involved in many women's workshops,

including a National Women's Seminar in Lesotho in 1990. My assessment is that these forums have helped, but there have been problems. The most serious problems are:

- These committees were in fact only advisory committees, therefore they lacked the power to influence effectively policy within the unions.
- Women's problems, and building campaigns around these issues, were discussed in isolation in women's committees rather than in the decision making bodies of the unions and federations.
- These issues were treated as side issues and not so important as the 'real' trade union issues.



Rachel Visser

Photo: SACTWU

- 64% of our union membership are women
- 59% of National Congress delegates are women
- 60% of the National Executive Committee members are women
- 50% of national office-bearers are women.

All this does not mean that our problems and struggles have ended. There's still a lot of work to be done.

Even in COSATU we still have problems. There is not one single woman on the National Executive Committee of our federation.

We have Dorothy Mokgalo as National Gender Co-ordinator who is doing a great job. Regular workshops and women's forum meetings have been held, but as

Dorothy says, and I quote *Labour Bulletin* March/April 1992, Vol 16 No 4,

"Organising the mixed gender forums is a responsibility of the *constitutional structures* and exactly how this is to be done must still be discussed with the national office-bearers."

The question is: how often does the Central Executive Committee actually discuss gender issues?

We are convinced that our experience in SACTWU has a lesson for other unions.

Instead of side-lining women into separate structures, women need to be part of the main stream of union life, and women/gender issues must feature actively on the agenda of all the national office-bearers. ☆

● Women felt isolated because they were pushed aside to deal with women's issues.

In SACTWU we assessed the whole situation and decided not to adopt the *approach of setting up* separate structures for women. We decided that we had to tackle the gender issue through our union's constitutional structures.

We were convinced that we had to keep women's issues in all the 'mainstream' discussions and activities of our union. We decided that by not organising separately, all the union members would be confronted with the issues.

This does not mean we are

not ever going to come together as women to discuss specific concerns. That will sometimes be necessary.

We have fought hard and vigorously for recognition and education for women in our union, and today we are beginning to reap the benefit within our structures.

The confidence of SACTWU women has increased and the attitudes of men in the union have also changed. Everybody is beginning to realise that the problems aren't just women's problems but men's as well.

Women are now playing a central role in all the union's structures from the local up to the national level: