

Women and Trade Unions

In this interview 'Mama' Lydia Ngwenya the Transvaal organiser of the Transport and General Workers' Union (T & GWU) — a FOSATU affiliate — talks about some of the problems faced by women in the trade union movement. The interview was conducted by Jeremy Baskin.

How did you join the Union?

In 1974 I was working at Heinemann Electric and was approached by MAWU. After they'd explained what trade unions were, we became committed and we joined up the rest of the factory. There were 606 workers in Heinemann, mostly women. In 3 months we managed to organise almost the entire plant. I was elected a shop steward and was one of the main people pushing the union. I became an executive member at that time.

In '76 we were all dismissed after a strike and management re-instated selectively. I wasn't re-employed.

In '77, I started working for the unions, for MAWU, here at Sacta House. I was the only woman organiser in MAWU in the Transvaal.

I pushed on with these men for about 2 years, when I was nominated in October '78 to get T & GWU (Transport and General Workers' Union) off the ground. By then, there were still no women organisers. The areas we were organising, metal plants, were mostly men, except at Tensile Rubber where there were a few women.

What is it like to be a woman working with all these men?

It was a real problem at the beginning but I learned to live with it. I felt inferior all the time, maybe because we African women think we're inferior to men.

They were expecting me to do things. For example, at lunch time, people would put in money and they'd nominate me to go and buy lunch with the excuse that I could choose better because I'm a woman. It became a habit that every lunch time I should run around buying lunch, making tea for them, after that washing the dishes ... My job would fall behind because I'd have to finish all the jobs they left behind from lunch time. Some of the young guys had already realised this was no good and suggested we should start rotating buying lunch. It was the young ones not the old ones.

By the end I was quite happy because other organisers were prepared to share the jobs with me and not push me too much at lunch time to do jobs because I was a woman. I got used to resisting saying, 'I'm not here to become the teagirl.' But at first it was quite hard.

When you got involved in unions, did your husband object?

That was a real problem. After I became a shop steward we were having excessive meetings, maybe twice a week. Our management was very hard so we needed a lot of planning. We'd have these meetings after work.

My husband expects me to be home between 5.30 and 6pm. But sometimes I wouldn't even go home because we'd have meetings at our centre in Tembisa and I was living here in Alexandra. Sometimes it was too late to go home and I'd sleep with friends. That made him very unhappy and it made our life very miserable. He couldn't see why I was involved in this. He was scared that I'd be in politics and land in jail.

He'd get very unhappy and think I was making excuses about meetings when I was going out jorling.

When we got dismissed it was worse because he felt I deserved it. How could we overpower the management?

Did you try to explain to him?

Yes, always, and encouraging him to organise at his place. He was a worker, at a laboratory in Jeppe. But they had no union.

We'd have general meetings on weekends in Alexandra. We'd leave 8.30am and have whole day meetings. He claimed I had no time for him anymore.

You know what husbands are like. He'd complain that I don't do anything — cook, make tea or do washing for him. It's true that I preferred to do the washing at night rather than miss any meeting. I'd rather strain and overwork at night to satisfy him. But he wasn't too happy and said that wasn't the answer. He needed me to be with him. But he couldn't put me off because I felt it was important to carry on. Now he's got used to it and he doesn't worry me so much. He's getting old.

That's the problem with married women in the organisation. You're in the middle and don't know what to do. Even at work if you think of the problems at home you don't concentrate ... you find yourself getting depres-

sed. What will you find at home? What attitude will you get from you husband and even your children?

Do male organisers here have the same problem?

Yes, their wives also complain about the same thing. One of our organisers had to break his marriage. His wife couldn't stand it. She felt she wasn't useful to him. She was young and didn't understand. Maybe because she wasn't a worker before. But even if she was, she wouldn't think it was worthwhile for her husband to stay away. She was not committed.

But even when you were going to meetings you'd still have to do the washing when you got home?

Yes. He didn't take anything in the union into account. It was as though I'd gone for my own purposes. He didn't think he could assist. You know, our people don't think we can share the work in the house. They think there's a specific job for women and for men. But here in town there isn't anything for the men to do, like there is on the farm. The men just come from work, take the paper, sit on the chair and relax. Even if the man arrives home earlier he'll never make you a cup of tea. It's in his mind that I must do all this because I'm a woman.

At one and the same time you have to have a job, be in the union and run the home. If you're a young woman maybe there's also a baby to look after. Maybe in the mornings you take your child to a creche or an old woman. If the man comes earlier he hasn't the ability to go and fetch the child and look after it while I'm still working. He expects the woman to go and fetch the baby, put it behind her back, get to the stove and cook for him ... and he's busy reading the paper.

And we do it happily because we grew up that way, we saw our parents do it and we think it's the African law.

Do ordinary women workers have special problems at work?

Yes. At present we're organising women cleaners in Anglo-American who work day and night shift. They have tremendous problems, especially the night ones. They have to leave Soweto at about 5pm but they must first cook so the husbands find food ready when they return home. They must also

clean the house. They finish work at 3am and they have to wait until it's clear to catch the train. When they get home maybe their husbands are gone already. They just leave a mess, the bed unmade. He can't do anything, not even wash the dishes. So she cleans again ... it's routine. This poor woman has no chance, at home and at work. Some only get half of Saturday and Sunday at home.

When they start work at 6pm they have a terrible time with the indunas. Most of them complain about 'love-abuse', because it's in the middle of the night. If she resists or argues then she knows she's in bad books, and can be reported as lazy and kicked out.

They also have to work very hard. The tenants seem to make no effort to keep the offices tidy. The most terrible thing is that Anglo-American isn't intending to promote women as supervisors. They haven't yet had a woman supervisor. There must always be a man to chase after you. They think a man is superior to me. Even the capitalists think the same. The women want to know why a woman with ten to fifteen years doesn't get promoted whilst a man can come with two to three years and get promotion to supervisor.

Do women have special problems when it comes to joining unions?

At Heinemann we had six women shop-stewards out of twelve. This was because we were insisting and our organiser, Khubeka, was encouraging us. But our chairman was a man.

During meetings we tried to fight the undermining of women's suggestions. They thought we were not saying strategic things. But we managed to fight that. If a woman stands up and puts a motion or a suggestion it should be taken into consideration. We succeeded in Heinemann because, as I said earlier, women outnumbered men. The women were taking the lead when we were on strike. They weren't scared even when the police were trying to thrash us and scare us with dogs. I think that's when the women realised that women can be determined.

But now, we have some women shop-stewards from Anglo and even though they're not taking the lead (there are some men), they're actually participating quite well. I don't know if it's perhaps because these men have been organised by me that they give them respect.

There are now a lot of women in FOSATU — for example Maggie Magubane, general-secretary of Sweet, Food and Allied Workers' Union

(SFAWU); Refilwe Ndzuta and Aninka Claassens in Paper, Wood & Allied Workers' Union (PWAU) although they have few women members; in CWIU (Chemical Workers' Industrial Union) we have Chris Bonner who assisted in opening the Transvaal branch. She has a lot of women at Piggot and Maskew.

But no union has yet elected a branch chairlady. Offhand, I don't know even of a chairlady of the shop-stewards committee. Perhaps a female treasurer, since people think a woman is more responsible and will be more careful with the money.

Even the women feel it's important to elect men. I don't know why. Even in textiles, where there's mostly women I've never heard of a chairlady of the branch or a president.

Excluding officials, are there women workers on the Central Committee?

Yes, particularly from Port Elizabeth, the coloured women, and some from the Western Cape.

What can be done to improve the situation for women?

If the women officials were allowed to have their own grouping to discuss the day-to-day problems that we encounter in the union. Having meetings of women is the first step. We can't just discuss it generally. Maybe lectures later to make an educational thing which will be transferred to our male executives and general membership. We must understand how we should see each other as a team and work as a team. Not have that spirit of undermining a person because she's a woman.

If we could give, particularly the young ones, an education, it would not only assist the organisation but even their families. This business of oppressing women at home, with unnecessary jobs, maybe it will come to an end and they will help out.

But why should women be equal?

Why can't we be equal? What do men see us as lacking? If they could tell what we are lacking to achieve the same rights in the union or the family, then I'd understand. But they don't give us proper reasons. Just that a woman is a woman! I'm not yet convinced.

We pay subs equally, we work the same shifts, we work the same jobs, we participate in the same way in the unions. So I don't see why we can't have an equal say and equal rights! Why can't we have a right to have a say in one grouping, even if at home we are suffering?

I think it's the time for women to come together and see this thing as a major problem for us. So that eventually we achieve the same rights. And we must think of many ways of doing it. It's a problem that will go ahead from one generation to another if we don't actually work on it. I wouldn't like my child to grow the same as I was, as I am now. I would like my grandchildren to actually feel free, in organisations, at home, everywhere. They should have the same say, the same rights.

But will it happen?

If we plan properly it will. The problem is also that we women accepted it. We didn't fight it from the beginning. We felt it was important for a man to be what he is. And so it became a habit and even in ourselves we sometimes become very shy, say when my husband has visitors and I ask him to help me. Because I think his friends will think he's a fool. But if we can start discussing these things everytime, our children will adopt another system.