

In South Africa today, men get jobs more easily than women and have better chances of being trained in different skills.

Women struggle to get jobs because they "do not have the skills". Women workers also face job discrimination and are the first to be retrenched.

Most of the top positions in trade unions, which should represent all workers, are held by men.

These are some of the issues Crecentia Mofokeng has been dealing with since she joined the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) in 1990.

Mofokeng started as a trainer in Nactu's education unit.

"When I saw no work was being done on the problems that women workers have, and there wasn't a women's co-ordinator, I decided to do something about it."

She got very little support from both women and men workers.

"The women workers did not agree that women should have separate training programmes and a women's co-ordinator. We discussed, debated and argued about the importance of women standing together, and in the end everyone agreed," she says.

This was the beginning of Nactu's women's unit. Mofokeng became the first Nactu gender co-ordinator. The unit started out to train women in leadership skills in their unions and to put women's issues on Nactu's agenda. Today women have won the right to hold their own work-

Nactu works for women

Until three years ago, the National Council of Trade Unions (Nactu) did very little about the problems of women workers. Crecentia Mofokeng joined Nactu to change this. Rosalee Telela spoke to her



shops, something they really had to struggle hard for.

"In these workshops, women talk about problems they have not been able to speak of before," says Mofokeng.

She says, as workers, women face the same problems as their male co-workers, such as low pay, racial discrimination, long hours, no pension and bad working conditions. "But, as women, we also face other problems, such as a lack of maternity rights and child-care facilities."

Women's health and safety at work is also a big problem.

"Women complain of standing all day, lifting heavy things without proper training or help, poor toilet facilities and slippery floors. On top of this, there is a lot of sexual harassment at work from male supervisors," says Mofokeng.

Women not only have problems with employers in the workplace, but also with union officials.

"Often

women shop stewards complain of male union officials sexually harassing them. Because of this, women choose not to stand for election, and unions and their members suffer because they miss the skills and qualities women can bring," says Mofokeng.

For the first time, women in Nactu have started to question the unions' commitment in taking up women workers' problems. "Most shop stewards, organisers and negotiators are men. When they negotiate with bosses, they do not negotiate on behalf of women, not because they do not want to, but because they are not well informed on women's issues and problems."

She sees women taking part in union activities as a way of dealing with this problem: "The only way women can have confidence is through education.

"Women have to realise that men learnt how to be shop stewards and organisers. They were not born leaders," she added.

The support for the women's unit is growing in Nactu, which has 24 affiliated unions. When gender training programmes are

run, each union sends five women for training.

During 1993, six workshops took place. Some of the issues discussed and debated were the role of women in trade unions, Nactu's policy on women's participation, how AIDS affects women workers and women in the economy. Always high on the agenda is sexual harassment in the workplace and in trade unions.

The Nactu leadership are only allowed to come to these workshops once we plan our programme of action.

Mofokeng explains: "These workshops are very important as women need to feel comfortable when discussing problems.

"But, at the same time," adds Mofokeng, "men should be part of discussions around the problems women workers face, if women are to gain respect and equality in society and in the workplace."

"I hope that, in the future, Nactu's women's programmes will be part of the general training programmes for all unionists within Nactu," says Mofokeng. ☪

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