

A CHANGE OF HEART

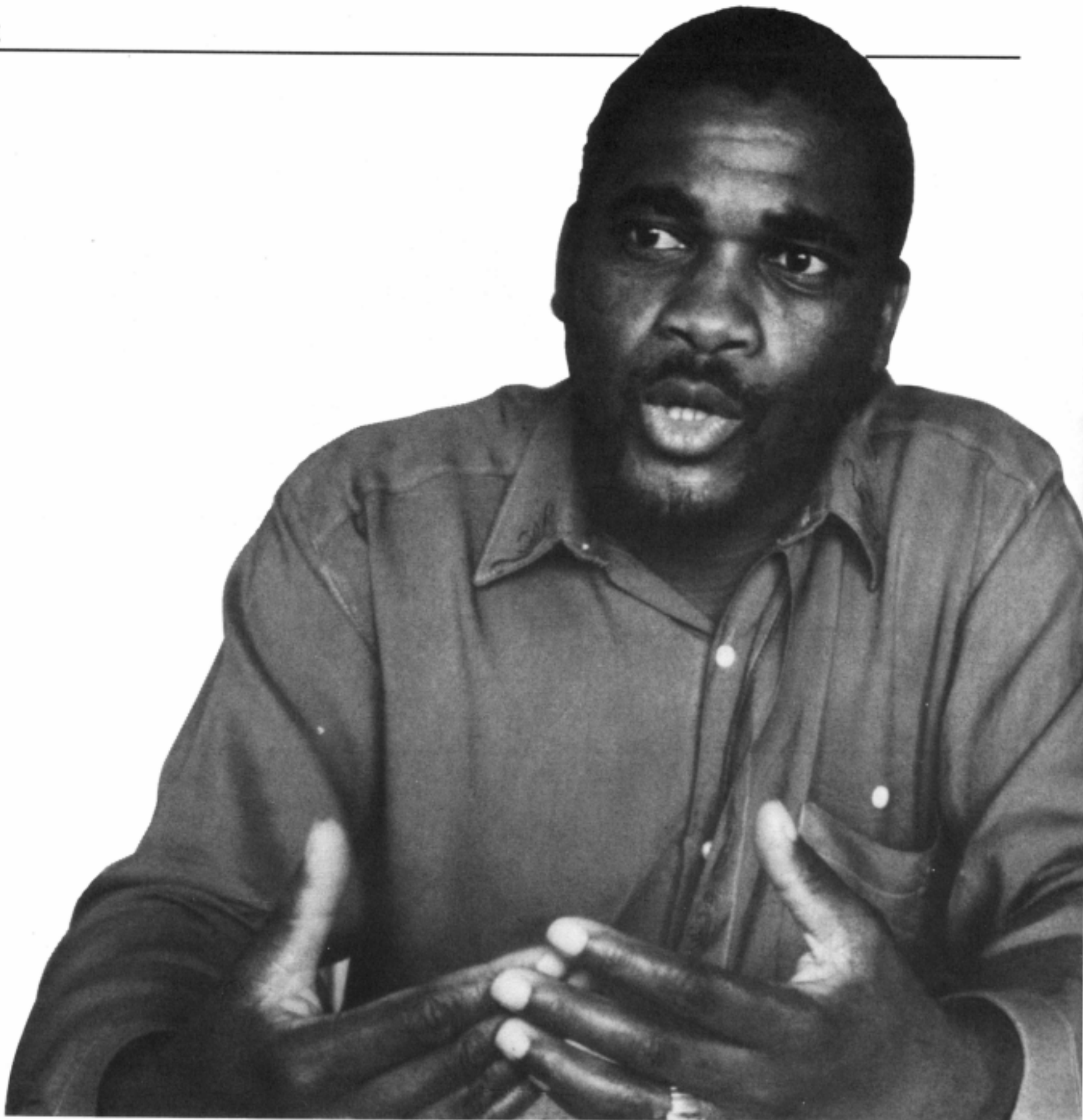


Photo by Thoraya Pandey, SPEAK Magazine

In the past, trade unionist Kaiser Sebedi saw women's issues as "unimportant". Today, Sebedi actively works for gender equality in his union. Thoraya Pandey asks him what made him change

Kaiser Sebedi used to be one of those men who listened with only half an ear when a woman spoke in a meeting. Like most other men in his union - the South African Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers' Union (Saccawu) - he thought that he was doing women a big favour by letting them talk about women's issues.

Now, Sebedi is a changed man. Or,

rather, a changing man. "It's a bit slow and sometimes it's not an easy task," he says. "But I'm trying."

SPEAK asked Sebedi what he means by "change" and why he has changed.

"I was always aware of the women's struggle," says Sebedi, who is assistant general secretary of Saccawu. "But, of course, I made no effort to fight sexism or to change my own ideas. I think the change in me came when I

attended a gender awareness course which was organised by the Ford Foundation."

The course was attended by men and women from all around the world. One of the things that Sebedi learnt on the course was how women feel when men don't see their issues as important.

"I was always aware of the women's struggle. But, of course, I made no effort to fight sexism or change my own ideas."

He explains: "I realised that men make women feel that they are wasting time when they raise problems or give a report. The way men do this is by making noises when women speak, and by not listening properly.

"I also learnt that men don't watch their language in meetings and when they are corrected, they brush it off," he says openly.

Sebedi also realised how important it is for men to be involved in gender issues.

"Women have to lead that struggle, but the gender-aware man must play a role in taking it forward. If a man is challenged by other men about his sexist attitude, it has a greater impact."

Sebedi is already using his new gender awareness in the union. A few weeks ago, Saccawu organised a national gender workshop which was attended by women and men delegates from the union's eight regions. Sebedi helped to organise the workshop.

At the workshop, it was agreed to set up gender committees in all branches, not only in the regions. The gender committees will act as "watch-dogs" to make sure gender is always on the agenda.

Saccawu also plans to conduct a survey of its membership. "We want to get an idea about what our membership feels and what their needs are. This will help us to implement a strategy that will work," he adds.

"It's not going to be easy.

We expect many workers to say we should fight our employers, instead of fighting within the union. But gender inequality affects every part of society - including the workplace and the unions. For example, only three women were elected onto Saccawu's executive committee of 60. It is difficult to say how much will have changed by our next congress."

Saccawu is one of the few

unions that has won worker rights for women, such as paid maternity leave, better working conditions and facilities as well as parental rights.

"One of our main demands is for child-care facilities at the workplace. If this demand is won, the men in Saccawu will take their kids to work with them. In this way they will become more involved in the family."

Sebedi believes that change must not only take place in his union, but in the home as well. He has started to take on more responsibility at home. "My wife might say it is not enough," he says with a smile, "but even she says I am doing things she never thought I would.

"I am not claiming to be liberated but I correct myself. I watch the way I speak and question the things I do," he says. "There are still many things about myself I would like to change but it won't happen in one day." ★

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