

# THE SOFT-SPOKEN PRESIDENT

**Violet Motlhasedi (right) worked as a domestic worker for more than 15 years. Today she is the national president of the South African Domestic Workers Union (Sadwu). Motlhasedi told *Thoraya Pandy* about her life and involvement in the union**



**V**iolet Motlhasedi was a very worried woman when she was elected national president of Sadwu. "At first I did not believe Sadwu made the right decision. I did not think I was suitable for such a high position," she says plainly. "Everything I had to do seemed too great. I was forever questioning myself about things I did and said."

She proved herself wrong. "With time, I realised I had to have faith in myself and in the people who put me there," says the soft-spoken president. "I attended workshops, meetings and conferences. I gave speeches and I read a lot, so that I could learn as much as possible."

Motlhasedi soon gained con-

fidence in herself, but on the way she lost two things - her job and her husband. Her husband became more and more abusive toward her after she became president, so she moved out.

And her employer told her to choose between the union or her job as a domestic worker. "That was an easy decision," she says laughing.

Motlhasedi worked for the same family for 11 years. Her employers could not understand why she joined a union when she was so "well-treated". "But everything I got from them I had to fight for," she says. "Even though they would tell me I was 'part of the family', it was a battle to get a higher wage, or to go on leave, or take

out a pension for me."

She tells the story of the day she brought home an application form for a pension fund. "My employer took it and threw it in the bin. I was so furious, I ran to the bin, pulled out the form and spread it out in front of her. I calmly told her to agree to the pension fund or I would leave. She agreed," says Motlhasedi.

**I**t is hard to imagine the gentle Motlhasedi breathing fire. But when she believes in something, Motlhasedi says she goes all the way. She first began organising domestic workers in the early 1980s. In 1981 she met Leah Tutu and Sue Gordon who invited her to join the Domestic Workers Employees

Project (Dwep). Dwep was a forum for domestic workers to share their experiences and teach each other different skills, like dressmaking.

Motlhasedi was a good dressmaker and every Thursday she taught other domestic workers how to sew. "I loved Thursdays because I was happy to be out of prison – out of the back yard." She also taught others ways of negotiating with their employers.

**T**his was where Motlhasedi's life as an organiser began. She would spend most of her free time speaking to other workers and encouraging them to join Dwep. "It was not easy because I could only visit domestic workers when the employers were not home. It's not like a factory where all the workers are together. It would take weeks to recruit one worker. Many were scared of losing their jobs, so it was hard work making them see the importance of being organised."

Motlhasedi said they had to be very careful because once an employer found out the worker was part of an organisation, the worker would be dismissed. "And because domestic workers are not protected by the Basic Conditions of Service Act, they did not get their jobs back."

Things, however, are changing. The government recently proposed a Bill that will protect domestic workers under the Basic Conditions of Service Act. "We welcome this move by the government, but we are



**"When my employers found out I joined a union, they treated me differently."**

doubtful if employers will implement the Bill once it becomes law."

She says domestic workers visit Sadwu's offices every day with complaints about their employers. "There is very little we can do because the law still does not protect domestic workers and many of the cases that end up in court are lost.

Workers have to face their employers alone in the court room because we are not allowed to represent them. Very often, they lose the case and their job," says Motlhasedi.

She says even if employers do not implement the laws, Sadwu will continue to be a "watch-dog" and expose those who pay very low wages and



**Motlhasedi (second from right) with other union organisers at a meeting**

treat their workers unfairly.

Another common complaint of domestic workers is that their employers tell them which party they must vote for in the next elections. Workers are told that if they want to keep their jobs they must vote for the party their employer supports. Motlhasedi says employers must learn to respect their workers and accept that they have a right to vote for who they want.

Violence against domestic workers is also a big problem. This includes sexual abuse.

“Many are too scared to do anything because they think the police won’t believe them. So

they keep quiet and their employers continue to rape, beat, verbally abuse and threaten them.”

**S**adwu is trying to change this. Motlhasedi encourages workers to speak out against the violence they suffer. “Violence against women is something I cannot accept. It is something that can only be dealt with if women come out in the open. This is what I’ve been trying to tell these workers,” she says.

Motlhasedi spends most of her time dealing with other people’s problems. In her free time – “that is, if I can find any” – she sews. “That’s partly to relax and partly to bring in extra

**Motlhasedi on her employer’s tennis court. “I love playing tennis,” she says**



money,” she laughs. “I also enjoy listening to country music while running the material through my sewing machine.

She says she has never been happier. “I trust myself, I like myself and I believe in myself,” she says proudly. “I have truly gained a lot!” ☺

**Sadwu’s head office is at:  
Community House  
41 Salt River Road  
Salt River  
Cape Town 7925**

**Telephone: (021) 47-5145**