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## **Separate Space: An approach to addressing gender inequality in the workplace**

Zuziwe Khuzwayo<sup>1</sup>

### **Abstract**

Gender inequality in the workplace continues to be one of the most challenging issues to deal with in South African society where patriarchy still exists. This paper evaluates whether the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union's (SACCAWU) separatist model for dealing with gender inequality have been successful. The union's decision to create a 'separate space' for women within the union is analysed. Data collection comprised of an analysis of SACCAWU's gender policy and material (including workshops, discussions and programmes run by the union). Participant observation and semi-structured interviews with 22 SACCAWU male and female members regarding gender policies, inequalities as well as their own gendered behaviours. The findings show that the separatist model has been successful in terms of fostering leadership development amongst women within the union as well as improving women's self-esteem. In addition, the findings reveal the challenges that still remain in the union with respect to how patriarchy still informs the way in which resources are distributed along gender lines, as well as how attitudes and behaviours conjure issues of gender inequality in the workplace.

*Keywords:* Gender Inequality, Trade Union, Separate Space, Qualitative Research

### **Introduction**

Sex is a biological construction but gender roles are a social construct where men predominately benefit at the expense of women. In South African society, patriarchy still has an influence on how different sexes relate to one another, resulting in women experiencing inequality in various spheres of society. Gender inequality in the workplace still persists. The recent Employment Equity Report of South Africa (which looks at the economically active labour force in the private and public sector) showed that 79.4% of senior management is occupied by men and women only occupy 18% (Employment Equity Report 2013 - 2014). This huge gap occurs even though 43% of females are professionally qualified and technically skilled as their male counterparts in their respective fields. (Employment Equity Report 2013-2014). For those women who are in senior management, only 6.1% of them are African women, while White women occupy 18.6% of senior management positions. When looking at leadership in trade unions the picture is gloomy. In the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) women make up 48% of members but leadership structures are predominantly occupied by men. In branch and regional secretaries' positions, men occupy 89% while women occupy 11%. In all of the unions of the federation, 100% of the general secretaries are men. The only position for which the number of women surpasses men is the administration position where women occupy 92% (COSATU, 2013).

Women within COSATU have argued for gender structures to be established within the unions so that their demands and issues can be discussed and a gender agenda can be a part of the

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union (Tshoaedi, 2013). One of COSATU's members is the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union. In SACCAWU, 70% of its members are women but the General Secretary, the President and most leadership positions within the union are occupied by men. The research looked at what measures have been put in place to address the gender inequality in SACCAWU and have they been successful and what lessons can be learnt.

## **Methodology**

The research used qualitative methods to gather evidence. This included semi-structured interviews with 22 SACCAWU men and women members as well as participant observation at the National Congress of SACCAWU and various gender training programmes that occurred during the research. An analysis of the SACCAWU Gender Policy was done to observe how it has been implemented in the union. A thematic analysis of the data was done.

## **Previous Attempts to Address Gender Inequality by SACCAWU**

SACCAWU has been organized in the service, commercial and catering industries since its inception (SACCAWU, 2010). It is mainly women who are engaged in work in these industries and this means that addressing gender issues in the workplace is of importance to the union. In her book 'Asijiki', Kally Forrest (2005) looks at one of the first campaigns that the union had in recognition of gender inequality. The 'Oppression of Women' campaign believed that women's oppression, which is when women experience unjust law or authority over them, was part of gender oppression because what affects women affects men. If women were, for example, in dangerous working conditions and were exposed to dangerous chemicals or machinery, this affected their ability to perform responsibilities and duties in the workplace, which affects their fellow male colleague's roles and responsibilities because they will be forced to take on the extra load of work (Forrest, 2005). The campaign also believed that household duties should be shared and that women workers should not have to do a 'double shift' of work (being an economic labourer and then a domestic labourer in the home).

This campaign is important as it highlights one of the first attempts of the union to address gender inequality by involving both men and women in the discussion.

Parental and maternity rights for both men and women have been an issue which the union has fought for since the 1980's. One of the first retailers that negotiated with SACCAWU and allowed for 33% payment of the normal wages of workers while on maternity leave was *Metro Cash 'n Carry*. This was significant as it showcased that "women's issues" such as maternity leave are important and need to be bargained for like any other issue which is bargained for on behalf of workers. Secondly, this negotiation was important as it indicated that issues affecting women should be part of the broader struggle for fairness (treating women justly while pregnant) and equality at the workplace, and not addressed as an ad hoc issue.

It was during the late 1980s that the union recognized that in order to deal with gender inequality at the workplace, it would have to target women specifically and empower them. Therefore, in 1993, a full-time gender co-ordinator was employed and a gender department was created to deal with gender issues, but with specific attention to gender oppression experienced by women (SACCAWU(c), 2002). This does not mean that men are excluded from the process of dealing with gender issues (e.g. Defence for Life Campaign training both men and women members on sexual harassment), but more focus is given to empowering women and ensuring that

they have the necessary skills and confidence to deal with the challenges affecting them in the workplace and at home. The significance of this lies in that the approach informed the current gender policy.

One of the first programmes that the union had in addressing gender inequality within the union by organizing women in a separate space is the Gender Empowerment Programme (GEP) which started in 1997. This programme has influenced why the gender policy continues to advocate for a separate space for women in order to deal with gender inequality (SACCAWU (c), 2002).

The aim of the programme was to raise consciousness amongst fellow workers about gender inequality in the workplace and this would raise consciousness within the union. The first year of the programme would focus on basic gender training and would provide skills on this topic. The second year would have workshops and training on economic literacy and collective bargaining. The final year of the programme would train union members in policy formulation (SACCAWU(c), 2002). The union would achieve this by equipping women shop stewards and officials with the necessary skills to take forward struggles of women workers in the workplace. The union also wanted women shop stewards to bring a gender dimension in bargaining processes (SACCAWU(c), 2002). Thirdly, the union wanted women to have confidence in themselves to be able to participate in other issues such as the economy and not feel marginalized. In essence, the aim of the programme was that it wanted to develop organizational capacity and skills for women so that they could participate in leadership positions (SACCAWU(c), 2002).

Organizing women in a separate space is a challenge within trade union movements, as leadership positions are mainly held by men and trying to only target women will not always be achievable. During the GEP programme more men were regional education co-ordinators, and were part of the programme but less than women overall. The success of the empowerment programme was highlighted by the National Gender Co-ordinator Ms Patricia Nyman who commented by saying

*'this programme allowed us to put serious emphasis on women and allow them to be empowered and grow within the union. This was the foundations for the capacity building of the gender department. It is still a challenge, but the programme was helpful in creating the building blocks which we still use today. Many women members are starting to occupy positions of leadership and they are gaining skills which they can use not only in a gender workshop but also in a finance workshop and in their daily lives'*

A participant of the programme felt that the programme was helpful for her as

*'the programme helped me in that I started to grow in my job. I was first a normal worker at OK Bazaar [which is now Shoprite Checkers] and when attending this programme I believed in myself as I had the knowledge and skills so I put myself up for leadership positions. I was not scared anymore as I knew I could do the job.'*

## **Patriarchy in the Workplace and Unions**

Patriarchy is an ideology which has been passed down from generations and argues that paternal authority belongs to the man of the household (Edley & Wetherell, 1995). This paternal authority is never to be questioned and it is exercised by the man being seen as the head of the household and the woman being subservient towards him. This has translated into the workplace as women have been allocated certain roles in the workforce which are subservient, cheap and highly exploitative, because being in roles of power and leadership are not seen in society as being 'feminine' (Edley & Wetherell, 1995). This also plays out in the types of jobs that men and women are allowed to occupy in the workplace, and in women's ability to challenge gender oppression as they don't have a strong voice to challenge it. The role of women in hospitality and service sector jobs feeds into the idea of women being better 'equipped' in these industries as compared to men, who belong in the manufacturing and mining industries as these jobs exhibit their 'innate' capabilities because of the sex category they belong to (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

It has been argued that patriarchy has influenced the way in which unions organize themselves with men leading and women playing a subordinate role. Kirton and Glover look at the history of unions in the United Kingdom and the United States of America and how they have a "masculine nature". Unions historically have had a strong link with paid work and achievement in this field (Kirton & Glover, 2006). This is important, as non-paid work (domestic work) was not seen as an issue to fight for. This then sets up a situation whereby already women's work in other spheres of society is not recognized and considered by unions when negotiations occur. Secondly, unions tend to be "anti-feminine" (Glover & Kirton, 2006). What this means is that displaying of emotions and relating on that level is not seen as worthy in a union. Rather the strong aggressive attitude is praised in a union (Glover & Kirton, 2006). This is difficult for some women to relate to as women have been socialized to not be aggressive. The sexism that exists in unions whether it is the subtle language, a male-defined bargaining agenda, which is when issues that are bargained for are set by men and issues that affect women are limited from the bargaining table, or as simple as how men and women sit in a meeting discourages women from taking part in leadership activities (Kirton & Healy, 1999). This type of behaviour has been reproduced and this continues the masculine nature of unions.

It is with this in mind that SACCAWU decided that it would adopt a separate space approach in addressing gender inequality in the union.

## **Separate Space for Women**

The debate on having a separate space for women in order to address gender inequality is nothing new (Hassim, 2005). Women do not organize simply because they are women, but rather shared identities and context influence their organizing together. In her essay entitled *Mobilisation without Emancipation: Women's Interests, State and Revolution in Nicaragua*, Maxine Molyneux argues that there are two main reasons why women organize in separate spaces. The first relates to strategy. Women organize together as they have a shared interest in defeating power which limits their agency (Molyneux, 1985). Secondly, women organize together because there is a shared identity which occurs because of the gender division of labour which unites women together. An example can be made of motherhood and how the responsibility of looking after the child is 'expected' to be done by the woman in the relationship which is unfair because it presupposes that women are biologically capable of looking after children than men. This then unites women together to fight for issues which address child responsibility.

South Africa has a history of women coming together to raise awareness and social change on issues affecting them. One example is the 1956 March of women (Black and White) to the Union Buildings to protest against passes (identification documents) which restricted the movement of Black women in urban and rural areas. These movements have not always been successful, such as the Natal Organization for Women (NOW) that organized around politics post 1994 and alienated women who were not politically active. However, many attempts have been made to bring women together to fight the injustice of patriarchy in various spheres of South African society.

During Apartheid, most women's organizations/movements were under the greater umbrella of the political liberation struggle. What this then did was that it subordinated the issues affecting women (childcare, sexual harassment etc.) as the political liberation of the majority of South Africans was the crucial issue (Hassim, 1991). Within these movements political and patriarchal themes dominated discourses as women were seen as the 'mothers of the nation' (Hassim, 2005). This set up a situation where a limited scope was created in which women could begin to challenge gender relations in the workplace, family and political movements as they were only viewed in this single dimension. This is important particularly for post-colonial countries as the outcome of being part of a broader liberation struggle has meant that an autonomous women's movement is constantly null and void (Hassim, 2005). This has created a challenge for women to organize together in South Africa to this day. Compounded onto this was, and still at times is, a belief that organizing as feminists was a Western and middle-class ideal and did not resonate in post-colonial countries.

In the new dispensation, women have started to retreat into 'separate spaces' (churches, co-operatives, local communities, social movements) from politically associated women's movement such as the African National Congress Women's League (ANCWL) as they feel that their issues are not being addressed (Hassim, 2005). The organizing which has occurred has had a feminist theme underlying it as women have again engaged with how gender relations occur in various spheres of society and how they are unequal towards women (Hassim, 2005).

Within COSATU during Apartheid, wages were a critical issue for mobilizing workers but for women other issues also motivated them to protest and become involved within the unions (Tshoedi, 2012). These issues were not only in the workplace but also in broader society.

'Separate spaces' have been seen as a positive step forward in addressing gender inequality because it is in these spaces that women can discuss their beliefs and values together and find commonality amongst each other. It is in these spaces that women do not have to feel censored because their male counterparts will object to their opinions. It is also in these spaces that women can begin to articulate their own point of views and begin to address the challenges and power imbalances facing them independently from any political association or from any patriarchal ideology (Hassim, 2006).

The way in which SACCAWU has chosen to deal with gender inequality is by having a separate structure within the federation for women (SACCAWU (b), 2011). The SACCAWU Gender Policy highlights the idea that the union felt that a separate structure was important as it allowed women amongst themselves to discuss and articulate properly the issues that are affecting them without being intimidated by men (SACCAWU (b), 2011). This particularly pertains to the issue of sexual harassment where some women workers may be nervous when speaking about this subject around men. Having a separate structure was argued to be important as women could, amongst themselves, begin to gain confidence in their leadership abilities and raise their concerns.

As a result, when it came to dealing with issues outside of the women-only forums they could be educated and confident to express their points of view.

### **SACCAWU Gender Policy**

SACCAWU's current Gender Policy is one of the most important and focussed strategies aiming to deal with and eradicate gender oppression in the union. SACCAWU, like COSATU, has defined gender as 'socially constructed and culturally defined relations between men and women' (COSATU Gender Policy, 2011: 3). SACCAWU recognizes that patriarchy is firmly rooted in our society and in order to eradicate gender inequality in society, a consciousness of gender mainstreaming needs to be created when discussing this issue. Gender mainstreaming in this context means on all levels in the union from legislation, policies and implementation programmes, a gender perspective is included in the formation of these important structures of a union. Women need to be central when addressing the issue because of previous disadvantage caused by patriarchy (SACCAWU Gender Policy, 2011). This is significant as the union has chosen to focus more on women than men and addressing the oppression which they experience. This is informed by the union's recognition that women have to be empowered first before gender discussions can occur between the two sexes because women are not treated as equals in society. This does not mean that men are left behind (they can attend workshops if they want) but more emphasis is placed on empowering women.

One of the aims of the policy in addressing gender inequality is empowering women by having more of them in leadership positions. The second aim of the policy is a mainstreaming of gender within the union (SACCAWU Gender Policy 2011). This means gender consciousness must be in the daily thinking and activities of the union from financial meetings and policies to educational meetings and policies and not seen as an adhoc issue which is only discussed in a gender space. The policy also aims to educate both men and women on the gender oppression that occurs in all spheres of society and to re-educate them in a manner which challenges this oppression (SACCAWU Gender Policy, 2011).

As mentioned earlier, the union has prioritized including more women in leadership. It intends on achieving this by having a growing number of women represented in delegations, committees and activities in the union (SACCAWU Gender Policy, 2011). The union would like the Gender Committee Chairperson and gender co-ordinators to be represented from local to national levels of the union and to be full-time coordinators. The union advocates for more women to stand for shopsteward elections. A shopsteward is the first line of representative on the shopfloor for workers (Mafuleka, 2015). The shopsteward is part of the leadership that ensures that the workers' rights are being protected and their interests are being discussed and negotiated (Mafuleka, 2015). The majority of casual workers are women in the retail sector, so the union has identified this as an opportunity to increase not only women leadership of the union, but to grow the membership of the union at the same time, and improve the position of casual workers on the shop floor. This is an important strategy in increasing membership by targeting young women who occupy casual-work positions. However, the union still struggles to achieve this strategy (SACCAWU Gender Policy, 2011).

## **Achievements and Shortfalls**

With the implementation of the separate space over a couple of years, SACCAWU has been able to achieve certain achievements within the union and the workplace. At the same time, there have been shortfalls which the union continues to fight for.

### **Achievements**

#### *Parental Rights*

A success of the separate space strategy is that certain rights have been won for both men and women. As mentioned previously, workers went on strike to gain rights for parent workers (SACCAWU (d), 2000). At first, it was called ‘mothers’ rights’ as women were the first to discuss the issue, but it then became parental rights. Pregnant women must not be in contact with harmful chemicals or machinery which might endanger the baby (Parental Rights Agreement 2000). The Parental Rights Agreement ensures that pregnant women will not be discriminated against in the workplace and that both men and women should have enough time to participate in both their careers and in the family. The Maternal Rights Agreement allows for women and their partners to have certain days off when she gives birth or when her child is sick when he/she (infant) is between the ages of 0 and 9 years. This is important as it indicates that men and women should play a significant role in their families and not leave this duty to women only. Both of these rights show how issues affecting women can become mainstreamed in the union and made into a serious priority for the union and not seen as an adhoc issue.

#### *Gender Workshops, Training and Self-belief*

Having gender workshops focused on women have been beneficial to union members. Most of the members interviewed found the workshops to be very useful and informative for them in the workplace. An organizer commented that

*‘having these workshops allows for issues affecting women to be discussed and to be made a priority unlike when you have education workshops and the issues affecting women are not discussed at all.’*

One of the most important successes of the gender workshops is the increased self-belief of women members of the union. Many of the women interviewed constantly emphasised that attending the workshops and the trainings have increased their self-belief in the workplace and at home. A woman member commented that

*‘before I attended these workshops and trainings I did not speak as much in meetings as I was not confident in myself. Since I have been attending these workshops I am more confident in myself and I speak up more in meetings as I am not afraid to voice my opinion. These workshops are important not just for me but for other women in the union.’*

Another benefit of the workshops and trainings is that the skills gained in these activities are not only applied to the workplace but also at home. Many of the women interviewed agreed that having trainings such as gender- based violence training and sexual harassment gave them skills to



implement in their own personal lives such as gender-based violence and sexual harassment trainings.

Another benefit of the separate space is that women have begun to take up leadership positions within the union. In the workshops attend, some of the women felt that they would nominate themselves or a fellow female co-worker as a shopsteward. This is important as women within the union are beginning to see that leadership is not only for men but for women as well. Leadership is crucial in addressing gender inequality. If more women are in certain positions of leadership, it is argued more of their issues will be discussed (Glover & Kirton, 2006).

One of the most important successes of having a separate space is that some men see the importance and value of having a separate space. Many of the men interviewed commented that they do attend gender workshops because they are important to empower women, but also they are important for them to learn about issues affecting fellow union members.

This highlights the beginning of changing beliefs and ideas on gender issues being important to both men and women in the union.

## **Shortfalls**

### *Leadership*

One of the ways in which SACCAWU has tried to address gender inequality is through its leadership. SACCAWU recognized that having more women in leadership positions will ensure that issues affecting women will be discussed and addressed (Orr, 2006). Within SACCAWU, a concerted effort over the years has been made to elect women workers as shopstewards. By 2003 the union aimed to have 65% of shopstewards to be women, but this has not been achieved (only 58% of shopstewards are women) as the majority of the members rejected the quota system as they felt that this would not be based on merit of the individual, but on the sex of the individual which some members believe is unfair. This is contradictory to COSATU's own policy of quotas in relation to gender as well as the ruling party of the country (African National Congress) which the union supports. Secondly, the rejection of the quota system puts into jeopardy the efficacy of SACCAWU's gender policy as one of the key components to ensure gender inequality is addressed in the union is not being fully implemented. This needs to be addressed if the union is serious about addressing gender inequality because without this quota no true change can occur within the union.

### *Patriarchy in the Workplace*

When looking at SACCAWU one finds that patriarchy still exists. Men still occupy the most powerful positions of leadership and women are still seen as the homemakers and mothers of the union. One of the workshops attended was the 'Defence for Life Campaign' workshop, was targeted at young women and it strives for young women to fight for decent work conditions, a healthy work/life balance and to develop their own leadership skills (SACCAWU (e), 2011). The workshop was held on a Saturday, and a female member had to bring her child to the workshop as her husband was not willing to look after the child. One of the male union members commented 'it is the responsibility for the mother to take care of the child so the child must be here'. This clearly illustrates how women are still viewed as homemakers and that their work responsibility comes after their home responsibilities. Secondly, this example shows how supportive partners are crucial in ensuring that women play a role in addressing gender inequality within the union.

Another impediment to addressing gender inequality is union member's attitudes towards gender inequality. During the Decisions for Life Campaign, a meeting room was secured for the

workshop. A disturbance occurred whereby the workshop had to move to another venue because the finance sector needed the room. Ms Nyman, the National Gender Coordinator of SACCAWU, was upset as 'they (finance department) feel as if they can come and just move us because it is an issue on gender and not finance. This is not fair.' This highlights how subconsciously gender workshops are not seen as a priority by some members of the union by behaviours they exhibit. It becomes critical for gender mainstreaming to occur within the union whereby moving gender workshops to different locations which facilitators are not comfortable with does not occur and that any activities involving gender are given the same respect as any other activity within the union.

One of the most alarming statements was made by a male shopsteward who said that some male union members do not attend gender workshops and trainings because they would be viewed as being gay. The shopsteward commented that some of his male union members tease him for attending gender workshops even though it is part of his responsibility as a shopsteward. This highlights an ideology that discussing women related issues by men is not masculine and must not be entertained as a way to address gender inequality. Secondly, the idea of discussing issues viewed as being gay raises questions about member's attitudes towards homosexuality and whether some members are accepting of homosexual members. The implication of this type of thinking is that gender discussions which include issues of sexuality and identities will not be fully discussed and this is a huge impediment to gender equality. Secondly the implication is that members of the union who are homosexual are likely to feel alienated from the union and will not actively participate in union activities which could result in a loss of members.

### *Masculine Nature of Unions*

The masculine nature of unions can be traced back to paid work organizing versus non-paid work, usually done in the household, not being able to organize (Ledwith, 2012). Paid work was traditionally done by male labourers and non-paid work done by females (Ledwith, 2012). This then highly influenced the masculine nature of unions which still continues today even though women are in unions and even are the majority. The masculinity still persists and remains a challenge even though the labour market is becoming feminized.

The dominant male supremacist culture in trade unions in South Africa has meant that the subservience and discrimination of women continues. As COSATU built itself on the black worker liberation, this then meant that issues of gender had fallen behind the issue of racial solidarity. Buhlungu (1999) argues that in the beginning of the struggle, officials performed various tasks and so there was no gender division of labour in the unions which meant that there was no unequal distribution of power. As the unions became larger, tasks had to be performed by specific individuals and women usually occupied roles which were in their 'nature', usually associated with hospitality and administration. Men who are leaders in the union are able to shift their domestic responsibilities onto their wives or girlfriends, but women cannot do the same. This has meant that structural exclusion from leadership roles has occurred for women where they feel disempowered and are seen by their fellow male colleagues as women who work, but primarily must take care of domestic work and not be involved in leadership structures of the union (Tshoamedi, 1999).

For SACCAWU organizing women in a masculine space continues to be a challenge. As mentioned previously, the Gender Empowerment Programme of 1997–1999 dealt with this challenge by having women only who participated in the 1st year of regional workshops attend the national workshops of the programme. This then meant more women would be coming to the national workshops as compared to men. In the second and third year of the programme, more

emphasis was placed on targeting women into the workshops and slowly the number of women in the programme began to increase. The interest of men deteriorated along the way as women became more assertive and wanted to have their voices being heard in a space created for them specifically. Also, because more of the issues discussed in the programme began to be looked at from a women's perspective, this alienated some men from the programme. The last year of the programme on collective bargaining was only for women and it became a project for women.

In order for SACCAWU to fully address gender inequality, it must look within its own structures and behaviours. A consciousness must be raised within union members emphasizing the idea that issues affecting women are not only women's issues but are trade union issues and therefore must be spoken to. The overthrow of patriarchy will not occur immediately but if it is emphasized, through trainings and campaigns, executive meetings and even National Congress meetings, hopefully, a shift will begin to occur and will reverberate in all spheres of the union.

### *Distribution of Resources*

When looking at the distribution of resources the union gives enough resources in regard to issues affecting women such as campaigns (pregnancy, parental rights, health etc.). Shop stewards interviewed said that the union does distribute resources to gender activities, but it could do more. An example of breast cancer was given by a shopsteward who said that the union was able to bring in a mobile clinic to come through and do breast scans and educate workers on breast cancer.

During the interview, Ms Nyman indicated that she believed the budget is not large enough but her frustration is usually with human resources, not financial resources. Most of the gender co-ordinators are not full-time but rather work part-time. The role is usually occupied by shopstewards who have many responsibilities to take care of and thus they can't give their full attention to being a gender co-ordinator.

### **Conclusion**

When trying to address gender inequality, one must first acknowledge that achieving gender inequality will not occur immediately. A change of consciousness and proactive policies need to be implemented in order to have this issue addressed. The idea of having a separate space, just like the one adopted by SACCAWU in its gender policy, has shown that success is possible and does yield results over time, but challenges still persist. In the case of SACCAWU, it needs to fully adopt all of the strategies (such as the quota system) so as to correctly address gender inequality and begin to change behaviours and attitudes within the union.

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