

# THE TRANSFORMATION OF WORK: Challenges and Strategies



## Putting Union Gender Equality Policy into Practice in South Africa:

THE ROLE OF  
TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP



The Transformation of Work research series is produced by the Solidarity Center to expand scholarship on and understanding of issues facing workers in an increasingly globalized world. The series is a product of the Solidarity Center's USAID-funded Global Labor Program, which supports the efforts of the Solidarity Center and its partners to document challenges to decent work and the strategies workers and their organizations engage to overcome those challenges.

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Photo credits:

Caption for farmworker wearing a red hat:

Agricultural worker and member of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) clears brush on a farm near Krugersdorp, South Africa.

Credit: Solidarity Center/Jemal Countess

Caption for domestic worker in pink uniform:

Salome Molefe, domestic worker and organizer for the Johannesburg branch of South Africa's domestic worker union SADSAWU, waits outside an office she cleans in Marshall Town.

Credit: Solidarity Center/Jemal Countess

Caption for farmworker who is building:

Agricultural worker and member of the Food and Allied Workers Union (FAWU) constructs a building on a farm near Krugersdorp, South Africa

Credit: Solidarity Center/Jemal Countess

**Putting Union Gender Equality Policy into Practice in South Africa:**

**The Role of Transformational Leadership**

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The Solidarity Center commissioned this report as part of its ongoing focus on empowering women workers, furthering gender equality, and supporting transformational leadership in labor unions globally.

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## Putting Union Gender Equality Policy into Practice in South Africa: The Role of Transformational Leadership

The South African union movement has a strong stated commitment to transforming existing gender inequalities in trade unions, workplaces and the broader community, as evidenced by the policies, resolutions, gender committees and education programs of the country's four largest trade federations. The Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), for example, created a union gender policy in 2003 to transform gender relations at the workplace, in trade unions and within society.<sup>1</sup> The Federation of South African Trade Unions (FEDUSA) addresses discrimination based on class, race, gender, health and sexual preference.<sup>2</sup> In 2001, the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) adopted a resolution that promotes gender equality, and the Confederation of South African Workers Unions (CONSAWU)'s key constitutional aim is the development, empowerment and promotion of women.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, the top leadership of South Africa's union movement is committed to transforming existing gender inequalities in trade unions, workplaces and the broader community. Yet as a 2012 report by the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) concludes: "In all the four national federations and their affiliates, men still dominate in the top six (leadership positions), with women occupying less significant positions such as treasurer, where women claim that they still rely on instructions from either the president or the general secretary of the union."<sup>4</sup> The NUMSA report, the author's interviews with unionists and other research indicate that despite the steps South African union leaders have taken to address gender inequality, trade union leadership remains predominantly male, women are not supported to aspire to high leadership positions and every-day gendered practices have entrenched male domination.

This disconnect between labor union policy and practice has parallels in many countries around the world, even as unions have become a primary global vehicle for advancing gender equality in both the North and the global South.<sup>5</sup> Representing more than 70 million women worldwide, unions have expanded their women's rights and gender equality agendas in the workplace, and in society, and won improved wages and working conditions for millions of workers. At the same time, even in countries where unions have strong gender policies, pro-equality politics, and high percentages of female members, institutional and leadership limitations and the heavy weight of society-wide discrimination against women and workers can mean that women workers' rights and voices remain marginalized.

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<sup>1</sup> "COSATU Gender Policy," COSATU National Gender Conference, July 7-9, 2003, <http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?ID=1992> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> "FEDUSA Women Equipped for Equality," <http://www.fedusa.org.za/fedusa-women-equipped-for-equality> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> CONSAWU Constitution, <http://consawu.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2011/12/constitution.pdf> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>4</sup> "Unions Run by Men—Report Finds Gender Divide," *Sunday World*, September 24, 2012, <http://www.sundayworld.co.za/news/2012/09/24/unions-run-by-men---report-finds-gender-divide> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Cobble, Dorothy Sue (2012) *Gender Equality and Labor Movements: Toward a global perspective*, Washington, DC: Rutgers University and the Solidarity Center.

This report explores this disconnect, looking at theoretical views of feminist analysis and leadership, and outlining some of the approaches that have shaped gender equality work in the South African trade union movement, through the example of COSATU. Highlighting insights provided through interviews with male union leaders and gender rights activists, it also examines how new strategies can be refined to close the gap between policy and practice, and further the ability of women and men to experience an equal and collective sense of power to become more effective representatives of working people.

### **Feminist Analysis and Feminist Leadership**

Understanding feminist analysis and how it informs “feminist leadership” is an important first step in our investigation. Through the lens of feminist analysis, it is possible to engage with feminist thought to understand how patriarchal relations organize and shape leadership within an organization and throughout social movements. Feminist analysis seeks to interrogate and unearth the deep structures that give rise to the oppression and subordination of women.

Feminist analysis helps us understand not only that gender is about men and women, but how it is possible to transform the unequal power relations between men and women. Further, it clarifies how and whether existing strategies contest patriarchal power where the control, authority, leadership, practice, intellectual work, organizational privileges and day-to-day culture is male dominated, with the majority of women in subordinate roles.

Feminist analysis also brings to light new forms of leadership that will effect a genuine transformation within social movements, enabling them to employ gender-inclusive and accountable power building and power sharing to successfully transform into reality the promise of gender equality within the labor movement in South Africa and around the world.

Collectively, these new forms of leadership are called “feminist leadership.” As used in this paper, the term means “an evolving way of thinking about leadership in which power and positions of authority—among individuals, in organizations and within movements, in the state and elsewhere—are used to create inclusive processes and structures that privilege people who have been traditionally excluded, foster democratic participation and operate on the basis of authenticity, legitimacy and accountability to constituents or stakeholders.”<sup>6</sup>

Srilatha Batliwala and Jeff Hearn, two feminist theorists and gender equality activists, provide important insights into what it means to transform unequal power relations between men and women and to contest patriarchal power in which the authority, organizational privileges and day-to-day culture is dominated by men, leaving most women in subordinate roles.

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<sup>6</sup> As defined in “Feminist Movement-Builders Dictionary,” Just Associates, 2011.

Batliwala sees a feminist leader as:

- Informed by a feminist perspective and vision of social justice;
- Involved with personal and collective transformation to use power, resources and skills in a non-oppressive manner; and
- Dedicated to building inclusive structures and processes to mobilize others, especially women, around a shared agenda of social, cultural, economic and political transformation for equality and the realization of human rights for all.<sup>7</sup>

She finds that feminist leadership is characterized by such descriptive terms as inclusive, participatory, collaborative, nurturing, empowering, consensus building, valuing and respecting others—none of which are typically included in mainstream definitions of leadership. Further,

- Feminist politics, purposes and principles guide a feminist leader.
- Feminists' practice of power when they occupy leadership positions is key to their leadership.
- Feminist leaders are encouraged to enact practices that share power and make space for younger women's voices as well as those of diverse ethnicity, class, race and sexual orientation and that consider the longer-term sustainability of organizations and movements.
- Feminist leadership is not something for its own sake. "Leadership is a means, not an end. Feminist leadership practice is aimed at feminist social transformation."<sup>8</sup>

Using Batliwala's frame of analysis, feminist leadership can be encouraged within the South African trade union context in part by creating a democratic organizational culture and an environment that supports women workers in their struggle for emancipation and assists men to free themselves from patriarchal forms of power.

Sharing power first involves recognizing that while male workers are subject to "power over"<sup>9</sup> as exercised by, for example, their employers, they also exercise a patriarchal structural "power over" the women in their lives. Male union leaders are therefore oppressed but also part of the oppressive structures they are trying to change—oppressive structures that are kept in place by what J. Edstrom<sup>10</sup> calls the "male order" or the naturalizing of male dominance that is kept in place through institutions at political, economic, ideological and epistemological levels.

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<sup>7</sup> Batliwala, Srilata, "Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation: Clearing the Conceptual Cloud" (CREA: Delhi, India, 2011), 29, <http://www.uc.edu/content/dam/uc/ucwc/docs/CREA.pdf> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>8</sup> Batliwala, "Feminist Leadership for Social Transformation," 28- 29.

<sup>9</sup> VeneKlasen, L and V. Miller, cited in Jerker Edstrom, "The Male Order Development Encounter" (IDS Bulletin, Vol. 45, No. 1, January 2014), 114.

<sup>10</sup> Edstrom, "The Male Order Development Encounter."

In “Men and Gender Equality: Resistance, Responsibilities and Reaching Out,”<sup>11</sup> Jeff Hearn assists us in thinking practically about the questions, contradictions, behaviors and actions that could assist us in framing what we are looking for in a male feminist leader. He discusses strategies for getting men involved in gender equality issues by exploring men’s resistance to getting involved and also men’s responsibility in getting involved.

Although Hearn is not referring specifically to men in leadership positions, his analysis provides useful insights for thinking about what it will mean for men to take on more feminist leadership roles. Key to his argument is that many men will resist efforts to achieve gender equality because it challenges their relationship to power—their power in the home, in the workplace or in the organization, where they hold positions of power and/or control and distribute resources.

Male resistance to gender equality manifests overtly—for example, when men dismiss gender equality as “women’s business.” But some men resistant to gender equality may also use the discourse of gender equality to appear “politically correct” or for political gain.<sup>12</sup>

Further, organizations perpetuate gender inequality because they often operate within structural parameters and through accepted actions that are “taken for granted.” For instance, organizations may continue a patriarchal division of labor in which women are in the least paid, least valued jobs with their reproductive work devalued. In such structures, formal and informal hierarchies of men dominate and issues like sexual harassment are not uncommon. When such patriarchal power is “the normal way” it is almost seen as “non-gendered”—it is invisible and accepted, a “taken-for-granted” expression of male power and authority.<sup>13</sup>

In Hearn’s analysis, the most important action men must take when accepting responsibility to change these patriarchal behaviors is to recognize and challenge the direct forms of control they use over

## COLLECTIVE BARGAINING AND GENDER EQUALITY

A key feature of promoting gender equality through collective bargaining is about recognizing and giving value to the reproductive work carried out primarily by women. Contract demands for improved maternity protection, increased family responsibility leave and in some cases, parental rights that more equitably share what traditionally has been “women’s work,” all form part of the larger struggle to value reproductive work.

Collective bargaining can be a contested terrain, not only between employers and unions, but also in relation to the kind of demands that are privileged at the negotiation table. Indeed, gender activists often describe ‘gender demands’ as falling off the bargaining table. Gender equality activists in trade unions (who in the South African context are mostly women), accuse the mostly male negotiators of not caring about gender issues.

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<sup>11</sup> Hearn, Jeff, “Men and Gender Equality: Resistance, Responsibilities and Reaching Out,” paper presented in Örebro, Sweden, March 15-16, 2001.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 13.

women. These behaviors range from shouting, threatening gestures and verbal threats to more subtle forms of control, like persistent criticism, ignoring women, defining reality based on their own ideas and perceptions and speaking on behalf of women.<sup>14</sup>

Hearn argues that one of the features theoretically defining a man is his avoidance of caring, which is seen as women's work. Men, Hearn argues, are socialized not to care for others.<sup>15</sup> For men attempting to transform themselves as well as larger patriarchal structures, both taking on "care work" as well as advocating for care work to be recognized and valued in the workplace becomes an important challenge.

Ending men's violence is another critical responsibility Hearn identifies. He argues that there is an inseparable link between men's sexuality<sup>16</sup> and men's violence, and that much of what men identify as a "normal masculinity identity" is associated with aggression and violence, such as taking part in the military and in certain sports. Men with more traditional gender role ideologies are also more likely to engage in sexual coercion and heterosexist and homophobic practices. Hearn identifies education as not the only element but a necessary one in reducing men's violence to women.

"Education," Hearn points out, "can assist men to understand what constitutes violence, why it occurs, how violence is gendered and importantly, assists men to develop ways of working against violence."<sup>17</sup> Hearn's description of education goes beyond men attending workshops. Rather he speaks about "self-education and the education of the self,"<sup>18</sup> changing patriarchal practices in both private and public life, affirming different sexualities and working towards non-threatening and non-oppressive sexualities.<sup>19</sup>

### **Transforming Gender Relations: South African Trade Union Policy Experience**

The South African labor movement has created a range of policies guiding activists struggling for a more gender-equal society. By analyzing the policies emerging from the biggest South African trade union federation, COSATU, we explore how union members, leaders, and structures can give life to the commitments made on paper.

The work of gender activists is taking place in a difficult economic context characterized by massive unemployment, ongoing job cutbacks; widespread casualization of work; low prospects of economic growth; and even lower prospects of new job creation—all of which create a sense of deep insecurity and vulnerability among workers. In South Africa, poverty also is rising, and those with jobs are responsible for supporting increasing numbers of people.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 22.

Many women workers find themselves in what is referred to as “atypical labor,” that is, informal, part-time, temporary, home-based and seasonal workers. As employers intensify the restructuring of workplaces to increase profit margins, atypical forms of work are increasingly becoming the norm. In turn, these new jobs are creating a host of new challenges in attaining gender equality. For instance, young women employed in more atypical forms of work are reporting increasing levels of sexual harassment and a feeling of both job and personal insecurity.

At a practical level, gender activists are finding that many of the available trade union resources are directed toward the fight against job cutbacks, making it difficult to access resources for programs and activities promoting gender equality.

Workers have high expectations that their unions will be able to secure wage increases and help stop job cutbacks, and more generally improve their living conditions. But in many cases, union officials and elected leaders are struggling to rise to the challenge. Leaders speak about an increase in worker demands at the same time they are facing growing intransigence on the part of employers, leading workers to claim that leaders do not always take their demands seriously enough.

The term social distancing,<sup>20</sup> which describes a growing gap between union leaders and full-time shop stewards and the workers they represent, indicates a waning culture of shop floor democracy. The growing gap is partially explained by a leadership that relies less on day-to-day member organizing and more on insider board room and court room negotiations.<sup>21</sup> This social distancing has been an important factor in the proliferation of smaller breakaway trade unions as workers try to find alternative organizational expressions for their dissatisfaction at the workplace.

Recognizing the existence of social distancing within the South African union movement, COSATU leaders taking part in a collective bargaining conference in March 2013 attributed it to differences in access to resources among leaders and their base and the distance between the union movement and the most marginalized sections of the working class. Social distancing is seen as exacerbating the challenges of recruiting workers in precarious employment in a context where two of every three workers remain unorganized.

The conference called for resource allocation to be re-assessed and, critically, leaders were urged to focus on listening to the voices of workers.

It is important to note that much of the trade union analysis of economic and trade union organizational challenges is presented in gender-neutral terms. Very little is being said about the role of the trade union in relation to reproductive labor, such as unpaid care-giving and household work, even as further

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<sup>20</sup> “A House Divided: The State of the Trade Union Movement in South Africa,” April 29, 2013, Libcom, <http://libcom.org/news/house-divided-state-trade-union-movement-south-africa-29042013> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

social spending cutbacks intensifies the pressure on women who have traditionally been responsible for reproductive labor.

Recruiting and organizing workers in precarious employment requires developing strategies that take into account multiple layers of marginalization and, in the case of women workers, the added burden of the large amounts of unpaid and devalued reproductive labor they must perform. So by not foregrounding reproductive work, trade unions can find themselves mirroring their very own critique of employers who ignore and refuse to compensate women for the reproductive work they perform.

COSATU's discussion on social distancing is also cast in gender-neutral terms. Women workers likely experience social distancing differently than do male workers who may locate their dissatisfaction as rooted in the difficulties of servicing members or bargaining contracts. Women, on the other hand, speak consistently about factors that make them feel distanced from union processes and activities or from becoming union leaders. In the COSATU 2012 Workers Survey<sup>22</sup>, unions identify issues like sexual harassment and family responsibilities as some of the constraints women experience in taking up leadership positions.

### **A Long History of Working for Gender Equality**

Over the past few decades, women workers have fought to ensure that the connections between gender oppression, racism and class exploitation in South Africa are a visible and important part of the trade union movement. In "Reflections on our Struggles," sociologist Shamim Meer emphasizes that since 1983, women workers have been fighting to make their voices heard, and seeking to claim their space.<sup>23</sup>

As far back as 1997, a special commission report to COSATU on the future of unions identified some of the specific challenges of promoting gender equality and organizing women,<sup>24</sup> and illustrates that many of the challenges the union faces in achieving gender equality are not new.

The report devoted a chapter to exploring the task of "building a movement of women workers." The trade union movement was identified as having a crucial role in fighting for justice for women in the workplace, in the labor market and in society, thus contributing to eradicating apartheid oppression and gender oppression in all spheres of society and at the workplace. It articulated an understanding that a union commitment to fight for justice for women in the workplace and in the economy would contribute to forging a movement for gender equality in the labor market, and was an integral part of the vision of a politically and economically strong COSATU. In the vision articulated at the time, the authors sought a future in which:

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<sup>22</sup> Findings of the COSATU Workers Survey, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> Shamim Meer, ed., *Women Speak: Reflections on our Struggles, 1982-1997* (Better World Books, 1998).

<sup>24</sup> "The Report of the September Commission on the Future of the Unions to the Congress of South African Trade Unions" (August 1997), chapter 8, <http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?ID=5117> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

- Women participate equally in the labor market and the world of work without having to face gender barriers or glass ceilings;
- Economic policies include women's emancipation;
- The trade union movement is a home for women workers;
- The unequal division of labor in the household is overcome through ensuring socially provided child care facilities and equal participation in household labor; and
- The trade union movement plays a crucial role in empowering women, in challenging the unequal power relations between men and women and in forging a movement of women workers.

The report argued that despite COSATU's progressive policies and resolutions on gender and women, there had at that time been little or no progress in the federation.

### **Unequal Power at the Core of Discrimination**

COSATU began formulating a code of conduct covering sexual harassment in 1988. Finalized in 1995, the code defines sexual harassment; sets procedures for settling complaints or grievances relating to allegations of sexual harassment; establishes disciplinary measures and victim assistance; and outlines an implementation program that includes education and training for all officials and members and a lobbying strategy to develop appropriate legislation.<sup>25</sup>

Under the general principles, sexual harassment is described as reflecting "the unequal power relations between men and women in society and in most cases entrenches the subordinate position of women." Numerous clauses speak directly to the expected personal conduct of individual members and leaders:

- 1.3 No union official or union member shall demand sexual favors in return for representation, employment, retention of employment, promotion or to secure a salary increase.
- 1.4 No union official or union member shall victimize the grievant or jeopardize her/his job security.
- 1.6 Union officials and union members shall create a working environment that is free from sexual harassment.
- 1.7 The job security of the grievant shall be guaranteed.<sup>26</sup>

In 2001, a COSATU political education booklet, "A Struggle within the Struggle" by researcher and educator Liesl Orr, strongly advocated for the transformation of interpersonal gendered power relationships between women and men; leadership commitment to challenge oppressive gender relations in all spheres; and honest reflection on individual and organizational practice. Orr (p. 12)

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<sup>25</sup> "COSATU Sexual Harassment Code of Conduct and Procedure," *Shop Steward* (vol. 4, No. 3, June/July, 1995), 73-77, <http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?ID=2085#ART19> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

<sup>26</sup> "COSATU Campaign Against Violence Against Women," *A Guide for Shop Stewards*, n.d., <http://www.cosatu.org.za/show.php?ID=1472> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

laments the fact that there is a big gap between theory, rhetoric and practice: “To some extent, we have been able to achieve progress; however we cannot claim to have changed the mind-set of many of our members and to some extent of our leaders.”<sup>27</sup>

One example of how these issues play out within the union is around sexual harassment. On this issue, Orr (p. 18) directly challenges the leadership:

“There is still denial of the extent of this problem in the federation. We need to come to terms with the realities of our day-to-day experience, no matter how sensitive they may seem. Sexual harassment...inhibits one’s freedom of expression and freedom in general. The perpetrators of this action do it consciously or subconsciously; hence the need to create a free environment and take purposive steps and preventative measures in our workplaces to educate our members and staff members.”

Orr (p. 23) advocates for leaders to:

- Become proponents of gender equality and encourage members to do the same at the workplace and in the home.
- Engage all structures in debates to advance the consciousness of membership.
- Achieve collective leadership and accountability, which is essential for the realization of the vision and objectives of the gender unit.
- Play a meaningful role in giving political direction and also being held accountable for the success / failure of the gender structures.
- Develop their own policy, policy positions, strategies, action plans and monitoring mechanisms.
- Adhere to the principle of collective leadership and see the implementation of the gender policy as part of their role.
- Hold Gender Secretaries accountable and ensure action plans are implemented.

Yet 17 years after the first code of conduct around sexual harassment was developed, it is clear that COSATU member unions still struggle to be fully inclusive of all their members. The 2012 COSATU National Gender Conference Declaration indicates that women are still struggling with the issue of abusive sexuality which continues to compromise truly democratic organization building. The declaration asserts:<sup>28</sup>

“In restoring the dignity of women, we will spare no effort in the fight against sexual harassment both in the workplace and in unions. COSATU and its affiliates will strengthen and resuscitate the Sexual Harassment Education Project and increase capacity effectiveness through strategic

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<sup>27</sup> “A Struggle within a Struggle,” COSATU Political Education Booklet, July 2001.

<sup>28</sup> “COSATU National Gender Conference Declaration held on the 27-29 March 2012 at Midrand St. Georges Hotel,” 2-3, <http://www.cosatu.org.za/docs/policy/2012/dec0327.html> (accessed on October 9, 2014).

organizational structures...We will step up our efforts to eliminate gender based violence through programs and campaigns in the workplace, in our unions, and in our communities.”

After many years of determined organizational commitment to addressing gender oppression, including sexual harassment, COSATU gender structures continue to face challenges similar to those identified by the September Commission. It is clear that a resilient patriarchy underlines the everyday work, practices and relationships of the union movement, one not easily shifted by policies, resolutions or stated progressive intentions. Both female and male COSATU leaders champion, uncontestedly, policies and resolutions adopted to address gender oppression. Less clear is how these policies and resolutions shape the day-to-day practices of leaders.

The COSATU experience highlights the challenge of feminist transformative male trade union leadership and demonstrates that it is a process in need of ongoing analysis, practical experimentation and most of all, male leaders who are willing to challenge their own patriarchal practices and work as role models in challenging broader patriarchal cultures.

### **Ideas in Action—Male Union Activists Undertake Feminist Leadership**

South African unions, as well as federations, have consciously and concretely sought to redefine and reshape patriarchal structures, cultures and practices to better inhere gender equality. Beginning in 2005, Gender at Work, an organization that combines feminist popular education and interactive learning, together with the South African Labour Research Service, partnered with the first of ultimately four unions that sought, through the South African Gender Action Learning Program, an alternative process to the limited, traditional gender mainstreaming approach. The unions recognized that male-dominated, hierarchical, union culture does not easily address such issues as violence against women and sexual harassment of women within the union, and they sought to develop alternative models of power.

The four unions included: South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU); the farmworkers’ union, Sikhula Sonke; Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU); and Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA).

While participating in the program, the unions reported on tangible results, which included:

- Increasing numbers of women joined the unions.
- More women ran for union leadership positions.
- Union leadership gained a deeper understanding of worker concerns and became more accountable in addressing them.

- Union activists reported that the process reinvigorated and re-inspired them, even in the face of wide-scale workplace restructuring and deteriorating working conditions.<sup>29</sup>

The process also ensured that gender work was not relegated to the status of an “add on.” All four unions developed union-wide strategies for achieving gender equality—and made notable progress.

The author’s interviews with some of the male union activists involved in these change processes, along with other South African unionists who have publicly challenged existing gender inequalities, offer insights into how union organizational structures can potentially move beyond the current status quo toward true gender equality.

These interviews are discussed in relation to Hearn’s conception of feminist male leadership and his practical suggestions for achieving these goals. The interview process involved eight male activists, each of whom agreed to speak on record about his experience in attempting to challenge their patriarchal power and privilege.<sup>30</sup>

### **Change Without First Comes from Within**

The men interviewed uniformly expressed an appreciation of how, by challenging male stereotyped behaviors and aspects of patriarchal power relations, they have enriched their private and public relationships and strengthened their commitment to gender equality. Hearn believes that even though men in many ways lose materially from gender equality in terms of less power at the workplace and at home and through the abolition of the wage gap, they gain “socially, psychologically, emotionally, in terms of a quality of life” because patriarchal cultures can lead to violence and war.<sup>31</sup>

Creating new social relations is another commonality that emerged throughout the interviews, as the men described how they are trying to address the many complexities of breaking out of masculine gendered norms inherent in union leadership.

Mike Abrahams, a union leader in SACCAWU,<sup>32</sup> which organizes workers in the hospitality, catering, retail, service, tourism and finance sectors, is one such leader. SACCAWU’s membership includes a majority of women—but few had been union leaders. Following its partnership with Gender at Work, women routinely ran for and were elected into key leadership positions at the worksite level.

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<sup>29</sup> “Bringing Back the Heart: The Gender at Work Action Learning Process with Four South African Unions,” Solidarity Center and Gender at Work, 2013, <http://www.solidaritycenter.org/Files/Gender%20at%20Work.South%20Africa%20Case%20Study.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> The interviews took place in South Africa in November and December 2013.

<sup>31</sup> Hearn, “Men and Gender Equality,” 20-21.

<sup>32</sup> SACCAWU is a COSATU affiliate.

Abrahams described how he is now trying to take on the challenge of redefining what it means to be a union leader, a process Hearn describes as struggling with the “self.”<sup>33</sup> As Abrahams said:

“Men must fight with themselves and not fight with each other—I have fought with myself and I have got a lot wrong. As an activist in the union I speak freely about my sex life and my relationships with women and importantly my difficulties. Other men will listen but they will not talk about their relationships. This is the difficulty of men not being able to struggle with themselves—they will only talk if they struggle with themselves.”<sup>34</sup>

Bongani Dlamini<sup>35</sup> was involved in the Gender at Work process while he was a union leader at BCAWU, a predominantly male construction union. BCAWU engaged key male leaders in the Gender at Work process, with the result that more women joined the union and increased their union participation, such as by becoming shop stewards. Dlamini described his efforts to apply lessons learned at BCAWU to the home, where he challenged gender roles by taking on caregiving roles typically performed by women.

“I try to work by example. Now, I am taking my granddaughter to the clinic and so I can talk about family responsibility leave ... The reason that the union is dominated by men is because there is a culture—men have time, they do not have to look after children. I wash and look after my granddaughter. We need to move away from the roles we think are for men and women and this autocratic and oppressive behavior.”<sup>36</sup>

Dlamini’s actions confront what Hearn describes as an “avoidance of caring,” one that “has been the defining feature of ‘being men.’”<sup>37</sup> Dlamini is not only challenging this normative characteristic in his private space, the home, but also is posing this as part of his work as a trade union activist.

George Mthethwa, a former trade union leader,<sup>38</sup> also speaks about creating an environment of equality in the home.

“I have tried to follow (this) advice for example how I treat my wife at home. We are about negotiating and we try to create an environment of equality—even with the children. There are many reasons that made me try to do this. When I was in the union I saw many things that I did not like—like how women were treated but also how women behaved. When women came to congresses or meetings they would wear clothes that they did not normally wear and men would only see women for sex. Women in the unions have no space to talk. I wanted something different.”

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<sup>33</sup> Hearn, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Mike Abrahams, interview by the author, December 6, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Dlamini is now a union leader in the Media Workers Union of South Africa (MWASA).

<sup>36</sup> Bongani Dlamini, interview by the author, December 11, 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Hearn, *op. cit.*, 16.

<sup>38</sup> Mthethwa was a leader in the Chemical Energy, Paper and Pulp Workers Union (CEPPWAWU) and now works at the Labour Research Service.

Mthethwa's actions to free himself from the alienation of defined gender roles means he might be forced to deal with a different kind of alienation, an alienation from his peers who, borrowing from Hearn's idea of 'homosociality,' create an environment of male bonding where there is a "complicit acceptance of dominant systems of power and status that ... accrue reciprocally to all the men involved by dint of association."<sup>39</sup> Homosociality can be one way to explain how men uphold patriarchy and protect power blocs through their networks of friendships and intimate collaborations with other men.<sup>40</sup>

Although not identifying as a feminist or even a gender activist, Mthethwa recognizes the patriarchal power society affords him as a husband and father and is choosing to give up what would traditionally be his "power over" his wife and children and to search for ways of creating a 'power to' – ways to use power to create different kinds of relationships built on agency and capacity.<sup>41</sup>

At the workplace, in this case, the union, a culture must first be fostered in which men examine how patriarchy is constructed and sustained before men publicly reveal their private struggles with patriarchal power. Indeed, Mthethwa speaks about both the pain and the joy he experiences with the choices he is making:

"My relationships with my friends have broken down because, for example, I am not going out on Sundays to watch soccer. For many others this is difficult. Many of the men I know want domination. They feel that they bought a house, paid *lobola*<sup>42</sup>—and in their view this is what their wives wanted and now she needs to cook and do everything else. The fact that I do not want this kind of life has alienated me from my friends. Now I feel comfortable staying at home. Now I can also not imagine my life without raising my child. I feel like I am a family member. I understand my role in the family, I understand what it is to communicate and for no one person to have all the power."

Dale McKinley, a well-known social movement activist, also speaks about the repercussions men face when breaking from defined gender roles.

"Men operate like packs—if there is one man outside of the group mentality—men cannot relate to this and you are questioned. Men are afraid and convinced that there are no other

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<sup>39</sup> Hearn, *op. cit.*, 13.

<sup>40</sup> S.R. Bird, quoted in "Homosociality: In Between Power and Intimacy," Nils Hammarén and Thomas Johansson (Sage Open, 1:11, January-March, 2014), 6, <http://sgo.sagepub.com/content/spsgo/4/1/2158244013518057.full.pdf> (accessed on October 9, 2014); Bird, "Welcome to the Men's Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity," *Gender & Society* (10, 1996), 120-132.

<sup>41</sup> L. VeneKlasen and Miller, V., cited in J. Edstrom, "The Male Order Development Encounter," *op. cit.*, 114.

<sup>42</sup> *Lobola* is a type of dowry paid by men in certain areas in southern Africa.

options. The very same men who want to change the world politically see no possibility of changing the world at a personal level.”<sup>43</sup>

## **Sexual Harassment**

Discussing the sexual harassment codes of conduct that unions have adopted, McKinley argues that a gap exists between stated codes and enforcement.

“One of the problems is that when there are transgressions (against the agreed codes) there is no action—organizations do not act. It is only extreme behavior that brings about any kind of sanctions. With the day-to-day transgressions people turn a blind eye. This is the problem that we need to address. There needs to be a sense that I will pay the price, I will be punished.”<sup>44</sup>

McKinley’s focus on sanctions may sound out of sync with Hearn’s<sup>45</sup> counsel that “reaching out” to men to bring about positive thinking will further gender equality, but McKinley raises an important issue of the value placed in an organizational context on behaving and acting in a gender-sensitive manner. While it might be difficult to police everyday practices, if an organization has developed a code of conduct or a gender policy, it would be incumbent upon the leadership and membership of the organization to find ways of encouraging, monitoring and enforcing the code. If this does not occur, the codes or policies remain paper or desk documents.<sup>46</sup> The lack of engagement with the adopted policies can also serve to reinforce that idea that promoting gender equality is of less value and importance than the other work of the trade union.

As McKinley puts it: “The idea that there is no time to deal with gender relations because of all the other issues is a weak excuse. In a union, is it only about representing workers or is it about establishing different social relations?”<sup>47</sup>

Often within women’s groups in unions, sexual harassment is one of the most discussed issues, yet there remains a noticeable silence about sex, sexual relations and even sexual harassment in the broader movement. This silence impacts on women’s participation in the union movement and allows for what Hearn describes as the “most taken for granted site and arena of men’s power”<sup>48</sup> to remain unchallenged.

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<sup>43</sup> Dale McKinley interview by the author, December 12, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> Dale McKinley, interview by the author, December 12, 2013.

<sup>45</sup> Hearn, “Men and Gender Equality,” 21.

<sup>46</sup> “Desk documents” is a colloquial expression used to describe policies that are adopted but not consistently implemented.

<sup>47</sup> Dale McKinley, interview by the author, December 12, 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Hearn, *op.cit.*, 22.

Jones Mashala is a health care worker and shop steward for the trade union HOSPERSA, a union that represents public and private health care workers, primarily nurses. As part of the Gender at Work process, HOSPERSA leaders expanded their reach to grassroots members and began building a new culture of unionism—broadening campaigns from a focus on wages to include issues central to the lives and work of its predominantly female membership.

Mashala believes that sex and the sexual relations in the union need to be recognized and openly discussed:

“As human beings, we cannot run away from the fact that we are sexual beings—with physiological and emotional needs—and here sex comes into the picture. The issue is ... that I do not just use the other person as a sexual object. There are also moral aspects of this as well as political and spiritual. Other men and women see sex as a weapon to be closer to power or to gain control. Having power makes you more dangerous, more susceptible to challenges. It is here that I tap into my spiritual beliefs. I see myself using the ‘servant’ model of leadership—I am here to serve...My servant role is extended to my role as father, husband, colleague, friend and comrade.”<sup>49</sup>

Dlamini agrees that:

“Sexual relations are rife in the union even though the union is male dominated. I am seen as a protector of the space—I confront the men—where I will insist that this is union time and space. If you are interested find your own space and time. Some people hate me for this but they will not confront me because of the power I have—formal power, but in the union I also assert my authority and this authority is based on being clean in action and deed. My authority is based on being clean.”<sup>50</sup>

The way in which both Mashala and Dlamini model themselves as leaders is what shapes their attitudes toward sexual relations in the trade union—Mashala draws on his idea of “servant leadership” and Dlamini is accorded authority because he “does not promote anything he is not willing to practice himself.”

McKinley adds to the discussion around sex and sexuality:

“We cannot relate to women in a desexualised way and I see this more as a sign of weakness on the part of men. Both men and women are sexual beings. Sexuality is a fundamental part of who we are. If you try to take away this you take away part of who we are as people. The core to changing the world is when we can have different kinds of relations. This needs to be part of our agenda integrated and equally important to representing people.”

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<sup>49</sup> Jones Mashala, interview by author, December 12, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Bongani Dlamini, interview by author, December 11, 2013.

## Creating Spaces without Taking over Spaces

Patriarchy is characterized by the obsession with control. Often when women are in male-dominated spaces like trade unions, or when men enter women-dominated spaces like trade union gender committees, male control is a key challenge in creating a gender equal space. Hearn,<sup>51</sup> drawing on Moyer and Turtle<sup>52</sup>, identifies a very recognizable set of behaviors associated with this control:

- Taking and keeping center stage
- Being the continual problem solver
- Speaking in capital letters
- Defensiveness
- Task and content focus to the exclusion of nurturing
- Negativism
- Intransigence and dogmatism
- Listening only to oneself
- Avoiding feelings
- Condescension and paternalism
- Using sexuality to manipulate women
- Seeking attention and support from women while running the show
- Speaking for others

Abrahams speaks very honestly about his own struggle with gender stereotyping, condescension, and control in a typical trade union space:

“When I listen to a women speaking I want to check if it is a women but at the same time I do not want to hear that it is a woman. I want to hear the person, the worker. This is very difficult and this is part of my struggle, my dilemma. Am I changing gender relations or am I reinforcing it—because when I listen to the voice of a women worker am I thinking of this voice differently to when I would be listening to the voice of a male worker?”<sup>53</sup>

Abrahams is questioning whether he is placing a different value on what is being said depending on whether it is a man or woman speaking. This act of questioning in itself is a powerful tool to a deeper reflection on how value is afforded and whether gender is automatically used to value or devalue a person’s contribution.

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<sup>51</sup> Hearn, *op. cit.*, 15.

<sup>52</sup> Moyer B and Tuttle, A. *Overcoming Masculine Oppression in Men* 1983

<sup>53</sup> Mike Abrahams, interview by the author, December 6, 2013.

## Conclusion

As this brief review indicates, while a stated commitment to gender equality is essential for efforts to effect organizational and structural change, it is only the beginning of the process and, without significant additional steps, cannot be expected to create substantive or lasting transformation.

COSATU's hard-fought efforts to establish gender equality codes covering a range of rules, behaviors and patterns applicable throughout the federation resulted in comprehensive guidelines that stand as models for trade unions and similar organizations. Yet despite this concrete manifestation of its commitment to gender equality, the goal remains elusive.

Through the lens of feminist analysis, and specifically the work of Batliwala and Hearn, it is possible to understand additional elements essential for achieving gender equality within a union environment. Their research highlights the necessity of less tangible aspects of transforming unequal power relationships between men and women. Key to that evolution is the emergence of "feminist leadership" among men in a male-dominated organizational context, in which authority stems from an interactive "transformational leadership" with both leaders and followers raising one another to higher levels of motivation and morality.

The discussions presented here with union leaders and gender activists working within a labor context gave shape to our understanding of feminist leadership, illustrating its application at work and in the home, and demonstrating by example the deeply personal transformation required to achieve a genuine and comprehensive equality that nurtures and supports women and men on their journey.

John Apollis, a leader from the General Industrial Workers Union (GIWUSA), summarizes the overarching challenge facing unions seeking to achieve gender equality.

"For me the much broader question is the need to look at how male culture influences everything—how everything is structured around men. We need a fundamental reorganization of the union otherwise we are not going to get far with breaking male dominance."<sup>54</sup>

This fundamental reorganization of the union must begin with the individuals in the union and in particular, the leadership of the union challenging patriarchy and the masculine way of seeing, thinking, doing, behaving and believing that this is the natural order of things.

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<sup>54</sup> John Apollis, interview by the author, December 11, 2013.



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