

## **Femmes à l'avant plan des luttes ouvrières en Afrique du Sud : d'invisibles à mobilisées**

Malehoko Tshoamedi

### *Résumé*

*Cet article met en relief la participation des femmes aux luttes syndicales des années 1970 et du début des années 1980, période d'intenses soulèvements ouvriers dans l'histoire du système de relations industrielles en Afrique du Sud. Les travailleurs réclamaient des changements à leurs conditions de travail, suscitant une réémergence du militantisme syndicaliste noir et contestant le système politique en protestant contre l'apartheid. L'auteur souligne le rôle de premier plan joué par les femmes dans l'organisation syndicale de leurs collègues et dans la création de divers syndicats en milieu de travail. L'amélioration des salaires et des conditions de travail, aspects souvent présentés comme des enjeux clés de mobilisation syndicale pour les ouvriers masculins, motivaient tout autant les ouvrières. La mobilisation des femmes africaines déclenchait cependant une tout autre dynamique, puisque la discrimination sexuelle venait dans leur cas se greffer à la discrimination raciale.*

# Women in the Forefront of Workplace Struggles in South Africa: From Invisibility to Mobilization

Malehoko Tshoedi<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

*This article highlights the involvement of women in workplace struggles in the 1970s and early 1980s, a period of significant worker uprisings in the history of South Africa's industrial relations system. Workers demanded changes in the workplace, prompting a re-emergence of black trade union activism and they went further, challenging the political system through protests against apartheid. I argue that women played leading roles in organising fellow workers' and founding trade unions within various workplaces and, like their male counterparts, were equally motivated to change wages and working conditions, often put forward as the key to male workers' motivation for trade union mobilisation. However, for African women, their mobilisation had a different dynamic as they faced the additional discrimination of both race and gender.*

## Introduction

The mobilization of African workers into trade unions in the 1970s and 1980s is known to have produced one of the most significant worker uprisings in the history of South Africa's industrial relations.<sup>2</sup> It was during this period that fractures in the apartheid system emerged, and processes that led to its eventual downfall were set in motion. Uprisings began first among workers, followed by students and then neighbourhood-based communities and eventually led to the democratization of South Africa in April 1994. Trade union mobilization during this period is therefore an important part of South Africa's history.

The history of trade union organization in South Africa has primarily, with a few notable exceptions, emphasized the roles played by men in the mobilization of workers and the establishment of the trade union movement. Analyses of trade union struggles during this period make little reference to the initiatives and leadership of women in workplace struggles for trade union mobilization (See for example Baskin, 1991; Sithole and Ndlovu, 2006). The exclusion

of women in the conceptualization of working class struggles in South Africa has to be examined within the context of the colonial and apartheid constructions of African women and their agency (or lack thereof). Such constructions often resulted in the perception of African women as docile and subordinate to their male counterparts. It was therefore unexpected that African women would be involved, let alone initiate, and lead working class struggles. The invisibility of working class women in studies on trade unions in South Africa reflects the complex nature of South African society, which is characterized by deep levels of racism and sexism. It further reflects on the politics of power and domination in knowledge production and how this has shaped research on trade unions and workers' struggles in the workplace. Women, let alone African, working class women, are rarely included in representations of power and influence.

Research on women in the trade unions began to surface in the early 1980s with the emergence of women's studies in the South African academy. These studies have been useful in highlighting the presence of women in the unions, thus challenging the notion of trade unions as men-only spaces. These studies highlighted the importance of subjective identities in workplace and trade union struggles in South Africa and helped our understanding of how they shaped the participation of the working class. Race and gender are also important factors in assessing working class struggles in the 1970s and early 1980s in South Africa. It is important to understand how these social and structural categories interconnect with workers' experiences in the workplace and trade unions (Andersen and Collins, 2010). This means, in studying working class struggles, we need to ask questions that emphasize the experiences of women, which are often not captured by a conventional conception of working class politics (Waylen, 2005).

The purpose of this article is to build on existing literature in order to highlight the involvement of women in workplace struggles in South Africa. I argue that in spite of male dominance in unions, women played a leading role in organizing their fellow workers and therefore, in the founding of trade unions in South Africa. The article demonstrates that women had a similar level of working class consciousness as their male counterparts and that they were as concerned as men with wages and working conditions. Although these traditional working class issues were instrumental in women joining trade unions, their experiences of racism and sexism in the

workplace were also influential factors.

This article is based on research that examined the mobilization of women into trade union activities between 1970 and 2003. It draws from oral interviews conducted with twenty eight (28) African women union activists in affiliates of the Congress of South Africa Trade Unions (COSATU), founded in 1979 and the successor of the Federation of South African Trade Unions (FOSATU). Interviews were conducted between 2003 and 2005 in Gauteng province.

### **Women's Involvement in Trade Union Mobilization**

In the early 1970s, several workplaces were affected by strikes over demands for higher wages and trade union recognition. Women, who were usually most affected by low wages and bad working conditions, participated in union activities during this period. In describing the working conditions at a garment factory where women workers made up 70 percent of the workforce, Emma Mashinini discussed the low wages received by African women and management's unilateral decisions over wages. She also complained about their long hours, stating: "I think the strikes that meant the most to me were in the early 1970s when we fought to earn an extra cent, and also to narrow our hours...We were fighting for a 40 hour week and in the course of the fight we did go out on strike" (Mashinini, 1989:19).

Several women took leadership roles in mobilizing fellow workers to join their workplace unions. Women like Mashinini, Lydia Kompe, Maggie Magubane, Thembi Nabe and Refiloe Ndzuta, among others, were leading figures in the early struggles of the trade union formation (Tshoamedi, 1999). The writing of the history of trade unions in South Africa has been biased towards men and has failed to acknowledge the significant contribution women made in the process of building the labour movement. However, oral evidence shows that women made contributions towards workplace struggles that led to the formation of trade unions. Women's involvement in labour movement activities of the 1970s is evident in disputes over trade union recognition rights in the workplace. One example involved 230 coloured<sup>3</sup> women workers at Eveready. Workers went on strike after the company had ignored demands to recognize the union and negotiate employment conditions including opportunities for promotion (South African Labour Bulletin, 1980:25).

Although in most of the strikes discontent over wages featured prominently, the gender discrimination suffered by women in the workplace often came under the spotlight as well as women took the opportunity to voice their frustration over their experiences with gender discrimination and humiliation. The SALB (1980) report on the textile strike at Frame Factory (in Durban, Kwa-Zulu Natal) in 1980, where women made up approximately 60 per-cent of the workforce, draws attention to some of the gender-specific experiences of women. The report outlines the workers' victory in gaining a 25% wage increase, their main demand, but it also underlines the deep discontent of women workers over their working conditions and their massive support for the strike.

Reporting on the strike, SALB (1980) highlights some of the problems that women workers faced in the workplace. The occupational structure was organized such that men dominated the supervisory positions, while women were concentrated in the lower grades where they were paid lower wages. This structure often resulted in men using their positions of power over women for sexual favours. Additionally, women at this factory were required to undergo a medical check-up, which included a pregnancy test before being offered a job. After the strike, there was an agreement between the workers and the employer, which required them to re-employ women after they had given birth.

The strikes in the early 1970s and 1980s involved large numbers of workers in industries such as textiles, retail, and food processing, which predominantly employed women. However, women's voices are largely missing from the writing and analysis of the strikes during this period. In most cases, analysts have focused on the economic (wages) or political (workers' rights and trade union recognition rights) aspects of the strikes, which, in their definitions, excluded women or gender specific issues. This has resulted in a narrow understanding of workers' motivations in participating in these strikes. While wages are a critical mobilizing issue that impact all workers (including women), it is also important to acknowledge that women's motivation to participate in protest actions went beyond the traditional workplace issues. Their gender-specific experiences with wages, working conditions, and other issues, were important mobilizing factors in their trade union activism and involvement in protest actions.

## **Injustices and Disrespect for African Workers**

During the apartheid period, the workplace was characterized by injustice and disrespect towards African workers. Most of them witnessed white, male supervisors physically assaulting African, male workers in the workplace. Sibongile Masangwane, a former Transport and General Workers' Shopsteward (TGWU) who worked in the transport industry in the early 1980s, "witnessed the injustices that were being committed against African, male workers" (Interview, 2004). Prior to working in this company, Masangwane had part-time jobs that lasted only "three to four months" because "at that time I had serious problems with white people... I had an attitude towards white people and therefore could not last in my jobs" (Interview, 2004). She pointed out that:

*... Joining the workplace and experiencing white domination, seeing a white man whipping African men; that used to shock and hurt me. That used to hurt me so much and I would wonder, how or what does this man say to his wife and children about being chased by another man at work? My heart used to be very sore. I could not believe it. I became angry, wondering how these men might have felt (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2004).*

In the first instance, Masangwane's concern with the physical assault of 'African men' in the workplace by the 'white man' indicates her racial solidarity with fellow African men. It also points to her anger at the indignity with which Africans were treated in the workplace. In the second instance, however, it also reflects her gendered views on manhood and the sense of violation of African manhood by the 'white man'. Masangwane's observation and emphasis on racial identity highlights the boundaries she creates, wherein the 'white man' is perceived as the 'other' and therefore the enemy.

Joyce Pekani, who at the time of the interview was the second deputy president of Chemical, Energy, Paper, Printing, Wood and Allied Workers' Union (CEPPWAWU), made similar observations. She argued that "...there was so much unfair labour practice. I saw people being insulted, being shouted at, and being treated like small kids..." (Interview, 2004). Pekani admitted that her motivation to search for information about organizing a trade union in her workplace was due to the anger she felt when she saw her fellow workers:

*Being made to pick up papers outside in the workplace (as punishment for arriving late at work), wash the bosses' cars, and sometimes the supervisors would force female workers to go to their houses to do domestic work for them" (Joyce Pekani, Interview 2004).<sup>4</sup>*

Gertrude Mabiletsa, who worked in the paper and printing industry corroborated Pekani's story. Her account demonstrates the power that the white supervisors had over African women workers. She highlighted the way in which Africans were "really harassed by white people" (Interview, 2005).

*... A person was like a donkey. At times before you go to lunch you had to wash a white person's feet, carry their basket and so on. If you refuse to follow instructions from a white person you could lose your job. Sometimes you would come in early in the morning and around 9am you'd be taken out the backdoor to go to your supervisor's house to clean and do laundry in their houses without the firm owner's knowledge. (Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005)*

The above discussion demonstrates the critical connections women made between apartheid and their experiences in the workplace. These linkages were useful in developing a collective identity as a working class. Their experiences as African workers cut across their gendered identities and women formed bonds of solidarity with their fellow African men allowing them to join forces in organizing trade unions. Collective identity, which often develops out of shared experiences, brings with it a sense of common purpose and shared commitment to a cause. That in turn enables individual activists and organizations to regard themselves as inextricably linked to other actors, not necessarily identical but compatible, in a broader collective mobilization (Della Porta and Diani, 2006:21).

### **Wages and Working Conditions**

There is often a male bias in the analysis of workers' struggles over wages and working conditions. The inference made is that wages and working conditions largely concern male workers, particularly because of their assumed role as family breadwinners. However, most interviews with women included in this research

indicated that, like many of their male counterparts, the issue of wages and working conditions was important in women's mobilization and participation in workers' campaigns. Women like Elizabeth Thabethe, a former Chemical Workers and Industrial Workers Union (CWIU) shopsteward, mentioned their frustration with the irregular conditions under which they worked. Thabathe argued that "we did not have fixed working conditions, like for instance our leave was not fixed; sometimes the firm would be closed for one week, other times two weeks" (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004). Unilateral decisions were often made about working conditions or wages without consulting or informing the workers. Agreeing with Thabethe's contention, Veronica Mesatywa, an organiser for South African Transport and Allied Workers' Union (SATAWU), argued that "[t]he wages that were paid to us was decided by management, we never had a set fee that this is our minimum wages for the month. Management would just make a decision that this week we will be paid such an amount and next time it would be a different amount. We did not have benefits" (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

Experiences in the workplace of working hard and long hours for low wages helped some women realize the exploitation of their parents and better understand economic hardships they underwent when they were growing up. Elizabeth Thabethe recalled her shock upon realising the low wages and the difficulties she faced in trying to make ends meet with her meagre wages. She remarked that:

*The money was very low; it was probably R13 per week (less than 2 dollars). I would really wonder about the wages and I asked my father about it. Was this the amount of money that everybody was earning? My father said 'yes' and even suggested that I was better off because others were earning around R5 per week ... As a child I could not understand that they were earning little money because of the system of exploitation. It began to make sense and I questioned how they managed for the whole family with such little money. The money was so little that we could not even budget with that. (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004)*

Although most African men earned low wages, African women were the lowest paid amongst factory workers (Veronica

Mesatywa, Interview 2004 and Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005). Fifty-year-old Gertrude Mabiletsa (CEPPWAWU shop steward at the time of the interview) underlined the gender differences that existed at her company in the 1980s in terms of pay. She noted that "...when we started the job, men were paid more than us, they were paid R74 (about 10 dollars) while we were earning thirty-four Rands R34 (less than 5 dollars). But we were performing similar tasks..." (Gertrude Mabiletsa, Interview 2005).

The discrimination between what women and men earned was often not based on their performance in the workplace. Reflecting on this issue, Maggie Magubane put on record that:

*Women used to work more perfectly compared to men... And even when it came to production women used to produce more than men. They used to stick to their work, men would go out very often, like going out for a smoke and so on. So women used to do most of the work but they were still underpaid... (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).*

Like the apartheid state, which generally assumed an African woman was dependent on a male, employers believed that women were not heads of households and therefore, did not have similar financial obligations to their families. Veronica Mesatywa got her first job in 1975 at a shoe factory in Pietermaritzburg in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Mesatywa's first realization of the inequalities in the pay between women and men led her to mobilize other women to go on strike. This was illegal and resulted in her dismissal from the company. Her views on the gender differences in pay were that "[m]en were treated as seniors and we were minors... They were paid more because it was believed that they were breadwinners and we women were working for luxury. But that was not true because women are more responsible for their families" (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).

The differences in wages and occupations were also noticeable between women of different racial groups. White women were at the top of the hierarchy, followed by Indians and coloureds, while African women were at the bottom. Mesatywa also raised her concerns over this stating, "...the wages were paid according to race, so White women, Indian and Coloured earned differently to

us African women...we were all women but we were coming from different races ... African women were the worst off” (Veronica Mesatywa, interview 2004).

Workers’ grievances in the workplace often centre on wages and poor working conditions. And this was the case for many of the women interviewed in this research whose working class consciousness and drive to join the unions was informed by the challenges they faced in the workplace. This research further confirms that experiences in the workplace are in fact, gendered – women and men experience the workplace differently. Therefore, their motivations to join unions are driven by these different experiences. The research further highlights the inequalities between women of different races. While all women experienced sexism and discrimination in the workplace, Coloured, Indian and White women’s experiences varied from their African counterparts.<sup>5</sup> The racial hierarchy allowed Coloured, Indian, and White women certain privileges. And these racial inequalities negatively impacted women’s unity in the workplace.

### **The Mobilization of Women in Trade Unions**

The early 1970s workers’ strikes over better wages and the recognition of trade union rights for African workers spread to most parts of the country, especially urban areas like Gauteng. The strikes had an influence on many workers, including women, who were the lowest paid and, as already noted, were often subjected to various forms of discrimination.

According to Modise, who still worked in a textile factory at the time of the interview, the 1970s workers’ strikes raised awareness about trade unions in her workplace. Influenced by political developments in the country, two women workers in her factory approached other workers about the low wages they were earning and the unilateral decisions management often made over their wage increases (Interview 2004). The following morning all the workers congregated outside and “...that was our first strike in the company...” It was also the first time that she learned that a union already existed in their workplace where management referred them when they complained about their wages and the “sixty cents increase every year” (Faith Modise, Interview 2004). Modise complained that:

*The union never came to the company to negotiate on our behalf and they never consulted with the workers... They never came to us to inform us about our rights or anything like that. We had a closed shop agreement and that meant automatically you become a member by working in the factory (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).*

The strikes in the early 1970s prompted many employers to introduce liaison committees and ‘sweetheart unions’ (those which collaborated with management against the workers) with the objective of suppressing independent trade union organization in their place of work. The union to which Modise refers (the Garment Workers’ Union) was at this time perceived to be a ‘sweetheart union’, and largely ensured that workers were disciplined and followed orders coming from management.

Unlike Modise, fifty-seven year old Lorna Motsoahae, who worked at another textile factory in Randfontein in the west of Johannesburg in the 1970s, was aware of the union in her workplace. Despite knowing that it existed she still felt the union “...was useless. They were telling us about funeral schemes, we are not looking forward to dying. We were not interested and we were still young” (Lorna Motsoahae, Interview 2004). Motsoahae’s workplace also had management liaison committees, which she also felt were “useless and toothless” because management used these structures as a way of maintaining control over the workers. After being appointed by her colleagues to be part of the committee, Motsoahae attended one meeting where she noticed that shop stewards in this committee

*...were not raising the issues that affected workers on the floor, instead management would just inform the shop stewards ‘who was not doing their job well’ and so on. But there was never anything coming from the shop stewards to raise the problems of the workers... (Lorna Motsoahae, Interview 2004).*

Lydia Kompe former Metal and Allied Workers’ Union (MAWU) organiser and founding member of TGWU returned to Johannesburg in 1974 after a long stay in the rural areas, and found a job at a knitting factory. However, like most female-dominated sectors, the wages were lower than in comparable male-dominated

industries.

*I worked there for about 5 to 6 months and then I got another job at Heinemann electric in Weinberg [north of Johannesburg]. At least we were paid R25 [slightly above 3 dollars] a week, while in the knitting factory we were paid R6 per week. I worked there until the factory moved to Elandsfontein. ... We started joining the union from 1974 but that was kept a secret because you could be victimised for being a union member. In 1976 we wanted our union to be recognised. That time black trade unions were not allowed to register, but they could be recognised and a house agreement could be signed between the employer and the workers. So we wanted that in our company. Then in March, before the [1976] June 16 massacre,<sup>6</sup> we had a big strike where the police were called in. They refused to recognise our union and they wanted us to use the works committee (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).*

After a long battle with the company, Kompe (who had led the strike as the shop steward in the company) and some of her colleagues lost the court case against their dismissal in 1978.<sup>7</sup> It was after this that her union, MAWU, employed her as an organiser and later on requested that she organize the transport sector:

*MAWU asked me to organise the Transport and General Workers' Union in the Transvaal. I started that union alone and it was such a challenge because the transport sector is a difficult sector to work in because you never find those workers. They are always on the road. And the employers are very sneaky people and very difficult, they have small little businesses here and there and very difficult and would never give you access (Lydia Kompe, Interview 2005).*

Also important during this period was the exchange of information about trade union activities amongst workers from different places of work. Masangwane complained to her sisters about the working conditions at her workplace in the transport industry; her sisters who "...worked at a company that was already organized by MAWU... offered to help me find a union that could

organise at my workplace” (Sibongile Masangwane, interview 2004). According to Masangwane, who in 1983 worked as an administrator at a transport company:

*My sisters helped me to find the union. We went to FOSATU and they referred us to a union that was organising in the trucking industry. So I met with Jane Barrett [who was an organizer] and I explained our situation at the company. She encouraged me to organize in the company. I managed to get another colleague to help me organize. It was difficult but we tried. I asked him to target the truck drivers, and I concentrated on those who worked inside the company. It was difficult, you would try to organise some and after 2 weeks you would be called to the office and interrogated by management and asked ‘what are you trying to do’? And by doing that, they did not realise that they were fuelling me because I realized that I needed to be persistent (Sibongile Masangwane, interview 2004).*

In some instances when workers changed jobs, they used their trade union skills to organize in their new workplaces. In November 1987 Nomasonto Rosa Mkhize (then fifty-two years old was the only female shop steward at her automobile company), who had worked at OK Bazars for the previous eight years and was in the position of shop steward, joined the automobile company Autolies, in Chamdor near Kagiso, one of the townships in the West Rand. She related her story:

*I was from Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers’ Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA) and so when I started working here, I inquired from my former union about organizing workers in my workplace and I was then informed that it was the metal sector and therefore National Union of Metal Workers (NUMSA) was the relevant union. They then arranged for NUMSA to come and organize us and we filled in forms. We arranged our general meetings in the form of braais (barbecues) over the weekends to ensure that as many people as possible would come... With the late Abisae Nkwe, we organized people and we had stop orders and the union was introduced. We were, however, intimidated by management, and workers were called in individually*

*and asked [their] reasons for joining unions and whether they were in the workplace to work or to be involved in trade unions? But we struggled until they fully recognised the union (Nomasonto Rosa Mkhize, Interview 2004).*

The process of organizing workers was a challenge, as Mkhize points out. She continued to discuss the strategies used by workers to conceal their organising activities in the workplace.

*... It was difficult to join trade unions. We had to fill the forms in the toilets where the whites would not see you and give them back to the union official making sure that you would not raise any suspicion. And sometimes we would hand them back in the township. But we managed to organize ourselves, at that time we were about 400 or so. We introduced the union to the company and it was a struggle with management, relations were very tense (Nomasonto Mkhize, Interview 2004).*

It is also important to note that trade union organization during the apartheid era placed a strong emphasis on solidarity and cooperation amongst workers from different workplaces. “In those days unions were not categorised as they are now that one union would organise only in a particular sector” (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004). Unions organized workers irrespective of the sector. More importantly, however, was the emphasis that was placed on organizing on the basis of race instead of gender. The objective was to get as many workers as possible to reach the target required for trade-union recognition rights in the workplace. This was crucial for most of these women activists, as it opened opportunities for involvement in trade union politics.

In the interviews, most women also talked about gender discrimination in the workplace and indicated it as one of the motivating factors for them. Many women were threatened with dismissal for either refusing the sexual advances of male supervisors or for becoming pregnant. It was in such a context that for many women, “... protection against the threat of being dismissed” (Thembi Masondo, Interview 2004) propelled them to join trade unions. In their contact with the workers, unions emphasized the potential to create change in the workplace, and that if workers were organized it would be possible to challenge unfair labour practices.

## **“You become dedicated and committed to the cause”**

The process of organizing workers to join trade unions during the apartheid era was challenging. “It was very difficult at that time because everybody was very scared of police involvement” (Alina Rantsolase, 2004). In spite of such risks, most of the women activists interviewed in this study still felt that ‘there was no turning back’ (Masangwane, Interview 2004) and continued to organize as many workers as was necessary to gain recognition status.

*It was difficult but we tried... organizing a union in the company was not something you could achieve over a few weeks. You have to first mobilize and strategize, spend sleepless nights planning. You become dedicated and committed to the cause (Sibongile Masangwane, 2004).*

The apartheid state and employers used propaganda to deter people from associating with trade unions, calling them ‘communists’ who wanted to cause trouble for workers. Motsoahae, who was working in the textile sector at Patons and Baldwin in 1981, discussed the challenges she faced in convincing workers to join trade unions.

*... it was difficult to organize, as I was the only person organizing... To get members was really difficult. When we started there were only five of us. The other workers were afraid, they had been told all the negative things about the union; that it was a Xhosa union that was going to make people lose their jobs, that we were communists. But I continued. To have five members in one month meant a lot; it showed hard work for gaining members. It took a long time to get a representative number for us to gain company recognition (Lorna Motsoahae, 2004).*

In some instances women workers arranged for meetings to be held in the townships to overcome the difficulties associated with organizing workers in the workplace. Meetings in the form of ‘braais’ (barbecues) or get-together parties were organised. During these events workers would be encouraged to join the union. Modise indicates the usefulness of this strategy and the pre-eminence of the networks in the whole process:

*Another thing is that we had meetings at our houses. So I would invite those people I was familiar with and they would come over and we would discuss about the trade unions and how they worked. And it was during the apartheid period and we were really struggling and it was a must for us to join the union (her own emphasis). So, even men ended up joining us. The strategy of inviting people at home really worked because those you invited would go and inform others they know about the union and influence them to join. The factory was surprised when they discovered that we were organized and had majority membership (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).*

Gaining the representative number was often no guarantee that management would sign the recognition agreement with the union. As some of the interviews indicate, it was still a struggle for workers to get the company to sign the agreement. Management played what they called ‘hide and seek’ games. As Masangwane explained:

*...we had an organiser from the union office, and he left and then Susan Shabangu [currently the minister of mineral resources in the African National Congress government] was brought in. We struggled together. Our employer had tricks for dodging meeting with the union, he would agree to meet with the union officials but when they came to meet him he would not be available. So the union officials then suggested that we should spy on him and call them whenever he is in the office. We did that and the union came and showed him proof of membership, signed-up membership forms. He was red he was so upset. We realised then that there was no turning back, because once we backed out then it would be easy for him to fire us. We were strong and united (Sibongile Masangwane, Interview 2004).*

These interviews show that women’s organization into trade unions was influenced by economic exploitation and political repression. It was the nature and the intensity of the repression they experienced that forced these women to “commit” themselves to take action against the injustices in the workplace.

## **Women Challenging Patriarchal Gender Stereotypes**

Most often, literature on trade unions and workers' struggles discusses the mobilization and organization of workers as a process that is led by men. This is based on an assumption that since women do not have a working-class consciousness, they are less interested in trade union organization. However, most of the women activists interviewed for this research argued the contrary. In fact, according to these women, it was more difficult to organize men in the early years of trade union formation. "...Workers feared white people in this factory. Most of the men were afraid that they would be dismissed. They did not understand that once they joined the union, they could challenge management on...workplace issues" (Faith Modise, Interview 2004).

Elizabeth Thabethe also argued that women were more likely than their male counterparts to challenge management in the workplace. According to Thabethe, poor wages and feelings of exploitation amongst most of the women in the workforce were prominent factors in the mobilization of women.

*...women were the ones who were more willing to listen and participate in militant actions. If we were to say that we are going to have a work stoppage or demonstration during lunchtime, women would participate in large numbers. Men, a few of them would come but most would say 'hey, we are here to work for our children.' The men who worked in that company were such cowards, they were so fearful of the management... Women were very militant and fearless of management. Even the management was aware of that fact because they would notice that women were always in the forefront whenever we had a work stoppage or demonstration (Elizabeth Thabethe, 2004).*

Several women interviewed emphasized the perception that men were fearful or not brave enough. On the one hand, these perspectives challenge the common stereotypes of women as being submissive, docile and less interested than men in political organization. While on the other hand, these perceptions also reflect an acceptance of gender stereotypes. Women in the study were simultaneously very critical of those men who were fearful of management while they commended women who did not submit

to the dominant female stereotypes of docility and submissiveness. Men who were afraid to join unions or fight against injustices were regarded as cowards while women were regarded as acting beyond the confines of their prescribed role and their acts of defiance were held in high esteem. Masangwane admitted:

*I am glad I had the opportunity to be in that industry because I learned a lot. Some people assume that all men are naturally smart by virtue of being men. But that is not the case and being in the trucking industry made me realise so many of their weaknesses. When it comes to the white person, men in the trucking industry were so afraid to be in the forefront and sort out their problems. Their organiser was a woman; their shop steward was a woman... They would say hey these women have helped us and took us out of the misery (Sibongile Masangwane, 2004).*

The interviews reflect the changing gender relations in the South African society at the time. Many women had joined the workplace and were also supporting their families and in some cases they were even heads of households. These changes were also reflected in the workplace as women assumed leadership in workplace struggles, which challenged the dominant stereotype of women being docile, submissive and dependent on men. The workplace and the political context in South Africa were therefore important in exposing the falseness of the assumptions that society held about women and men. The interviews show that it was a sense of grievance or injustice that led to a working class consciousness among women and to their subsequent inclination to join unions.

Although women were successful in organizing workers and challenging management in the workplace, African male workers had strong views about the unsuitability of women for leadership roles. According to the women activists, many men still perceived women as the weaker sex, and therefore unacceptable as leaders in the trade unions. But women like Masangwane challenged these gender stereotypes, daring men to join the unions if they were ‘real men’. She explains that:

*Some would say that I could not tell them anything as a woman. And my response would be ‘you cannot tell me anything. Where have you ever seen a man being chased*

*by another man, running round the truck?’ I mean I used to see them all the time from my office being whipped by the white boss. I would ask them to explain to me ‘how could another man whip you?’ And I would say to them ‘he (the employer) would not dare do that to me... he can only do it to you.’ And they would say ‘singahlulwa ngumfazi?’ (a woman can’t do better than us). And you know once you do that to a man you are challenging his manhood, so for some they would end up joining the union once they hear me talking like that (Sibongile Masangwane, 2004).*

In some instances women activists also faced sexual harassment by the same men who they were trying to organise into the trade unions. ‘Smart’ women like Kompe, who was an organiser for transport workers, however, found ways of dealing with such incidents. In discussing the challenges she faced in persuading men to join the union, she points out that:

*... being a woman just made it worse. And working with all these men was such a challenge; some would come to me and say ‘if you don’t agree to sleep with me I’m going to tell the others not to join the union.’ You know all those things and I managed to overcome that, I would say ok man we’ll talk, and then call the meeting with the hope that I would agree. With membership, you need to be very smart to overcome such challenges (Lydia Kompe, 2005).*

Franzway (2001:105) argues, “when sexual harassment occurs, it involves the exercise of power through sexual means in the context of a patriarchal society based on unequal gender relations.” This illustrates how men in the unions express their power and dominance through the subordination of women. Regardless of being in leadership positions, women were still regarded as inferior and unequal to their male counterparts.

### **Hostility Towards Women as Leaders in Unions**

As women were in the forefront of efforts to organize workers, a number became shop stewards and some were even elected as General Secretary (for example, Emma Mashinini; Maggie Magubane; Thembi Nabe) or President (for instance, Faith Modise). In the early years of trade unions, organization was less

hierarchical and therefore union positions were less associated with power and influence (Tshoedi, 1999). However, with the growth and success of the unions in the mid-1980s, unions gained power and influence in the workplace and the broader liberation struggle. Trade unionism came to be perceived as a male terrain, and more men began to dominate unions. Gender stereotypes commonly held in society, which regarded politics as a male domain, became dominant in trade unions and as a result women were regarded as unsuitable for leadership roles. According to Kally Forrest, a former trade unionist, “The decline of women in leadership can be attributed to union strength, the fact that unions were gaining more power meant that it was not a place for women to be in, it was a place for men. Men are the leaders and power is often associated with them” (Kally Forrest, Interview 1997).

Since attributes of power and influence did not conform to the dominant stereotypes about women as being of the weaker sex, “there were those who felt that they could not be led by a woman” (Patricia Khumalo, Interview 2004). Maggie Magubane, who was the founder of the Sweet Food and Allied Workers’ Union (SFAWU) in the Johannesburg region, and was its general secretary in 1975, argued that “Kwa-Zulu Natal was especially difficult because the male workers felt that you could not do certain things as a woman, that a woman cannot address them. It was more the tradition that ‘a woman cannot stand in front of us and tell us what to do’...” (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004).

Magubane was one of the few women in the early years of trade union mobilization who occupied a position of leadership. She and other women like Thembi Nabe, who had held positions of General Secretary in the early 1980s, were forced to resign in the latter part of the decade from these positions by hostile male attitudes within their trade union organizations. According to Magubane, when the union grew and expanded its membership countrywide, patriarchal male attitudes re-surfaced. “There were too many fights ... People from Durban (in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province) became very arrogant, some of them saying: ‘no she cannot be our leader as a woman’” (Maggie Magubane, Interview 2004). Magubane eventually stepped down and a man took over from her.

Although Emma Mashinini, another general secretary from the 1970s, resigned to pursue other interests, her decision was influenced by power struggles within the union that challenged

women's leadership roles (Emma Mashinini, Interview 2005). Veronica Mesatywa cited an example of these power struggles within CCAWUSA at the time of Mashinini:

*...When we had our congress in Pietermaritzburg (in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province), there were people who wanted to compete for her position. And so male comrades were caucusing against her, wanting her to step down... male comrades did not want to hear a thing ... they were acting in certain ways that would give you the message that you do not belong in the trade unions but in the kitchen. For instance they would disrespect women at congresses. When a woman addressed a congress/meeting they would demand that she sits down, that she was being out of order (Veronica Mesatywa, Interview 2004).*

In explaining what happened within the labour movement and the power struggles that ensued, Mesatywa (Interview 2004) reflected on the unequal gender relations of power and domination as well as the sexual politics in the unions, in which men were resistant to even the presence of women in the unions, let alone women in leadership positions. Similar patriarchal tendencies have also been observed within political organizations like the ANC in the early 1980s (see Hassim, 2004:444). The challenge for these women leaders was not only dealing with men in the unions, but with employers as well. According to Maggie Magubane, "it was difficult, as a woman, because employers never recognized women as trade unionists" (Interview 2004). Mashinini adds that "management was reluctant and resisted negotiating with women" (Interview 2005). Women were not perceived to be capable of representing workers on important issues such as wages or working conditions and neither employers nor unions regarded women as being equal to men in the workplace.

The male patriarchal collusion in the workplace was reflected mostly in collective bargaining issues whereby, on the one hand, unions prioritized wages and working conditions, excluding issues of maternity leave and equal pay between women and men, and on the other hand, employers were willing to negotiate and concede only to non-gender orientated demands. Sex discrimination against women was rarely considered among issues to be included in the working conditions. According to Thabethe:

*For instance when we wanted to raise issues of equal pay for equal work, we were not taken seriously as women. If we were performing the same tasks why should we be paid less? But at that time women were seen as only working for beauty cosmetics and other non-essentials like clothing. While men were working because they had responsibilities; they had families to take care of. Then we had to challenge such perceptions... (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).*

These sexist views by white employers, and by African male workers and unionists, demonstrate their ignorance of the changes in the South African society during this period. Including the changing social dynamics of urban African families, as more women became single parents or heads of households. Even in those situations in which women were married, Africans earned low wages, making it difficult for a family to survive on a single income. According to Elizabeth Thabethe:

*... We were taking this struggle as not only about workplace related issues, but we were also having this woman consciousness [my own emphasis], that why can't women organize themselves. Because at the time women were not just staying at home and raising babies, but they had to go to work, they were forced to become workers... There was a demand for us to join the workforce. But when we got into the workplace you discover that it is so male dominated. White males filled every category of management positions. But then also in the unions you found that [African] men were also dominating women. Talking about women's issues it was like a joke, there was no space for addressing women's issues (Elizabeth Thabethe, Interview 2004).*

According to the women activists in this study, the domination of and discrimination against women was to be found in all sectors of society. African women experienced sexist attitudes from both white and African men in South African society. Their interests as women in the workplace and in the unions were not fully addressed. The labour movement and political organizations failed to problematize sexism and gender inequality. Race became a

dominant discourse used by both the opponents of apartheid and the apartheid regime itself. This demonstrates the gender hierarchy in the representation of issues within organizations. It further underscores the undermining of the interests of the less powerful groups within the public discourses dominated by masculine ideologies.

## **Conclusion**

In this article, I started by noting the failure by labour movement scholars to acknowledge the presence and activism of women in working class struggles in the early years of trade union formation in South Africa. I noted the dominant conventional view that defines only men's activities and interests in the workplace and trade unions as politics and therefore worthy of being researched. This, in turn, has contributed to the invisibility of women in studies about trade unions in South Africa. More significantly in the South African context is the interconnection of racism and sexism dominant in writing about African working class women, who often are associated with docility and powerlessness.

The interviews presented in this article, support earlier studies that brought to light women's activism in trade union struggles in South African workplaces further demonstrating that women's issues such as maternity leave, sexual harassment and gender discrimination in the workplace are not often included in male political terms and are therefore excluded in analyses of workers' struggles. However, because the working class is diverse and experiences of the workplace differ, workers' issues and activism cannot be boxed into a single category.

Women's involvement in trade union activities brings to the fore the distinctions in the identities of the working-class as well as the diversity of working-class issues. Women's fight against sexism in the workplace, tackling issues such as discrimination in employment opportunities and wages, and sexual harassment, expands our understanding of working-class politics. Such struggles underscore the gendered nature of working-class politics, which is frequently ignored in analyses of working-class struggles.

This article further reflects on women's agency in trade union mobilization and workplace struggles. Women constituted part of the driving force in the process of forming trade unions in various workplaces. Their 'bravery' in initiating trade union activities at the risk of being fired resulted in their election to

leadership positions. Their leadership was, however, contested in the early 1980s as unions gained power and influence. It was also at the same period that unions and internal political organizations adopted a militant approach towards capitalism and the apartheid regime. With the dominant patriarchal attitudes within the unions, women were regarded as unsuitable to provide militant leadership. Men in the unions demonstrate their power and the subordination of women by undermining women's leadership and sometimes through sexual harassment. Women have engaged with the gender politics of the unions, subverting male power and dominance, thus enforcing their right to organize and mobilize in the unions.

## Endnotes

1. Senior Lecturer, Sociology, University of Pretoria, malehoko.tshoedi@up.ac.za
2. Apartheid policies classified South Africans into four different racial groupings, African, white, coloured and Indian. In the early 1970s the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) countered this racial ideology by defining all the oppressed groups as black (African, Coloured and Indian). These classifications have been used interchangeably during the apartheid period and in the post-apartheid period. In this research, I use black to include the three racial categories as defined by the BCM, and African as an exclusive category that refers only to one racial group under the apartheid classification.
3. The term coloured in South Africa is often used to refer to people of mixed race.
4. Von Holdt (2003:75) refers to such instances as “workplace practices that constituted blacks as the servants of whites.”
5. Buhlungu (2010) notes that while COSATU advocated for non-racialism in organising workers into trade unions, the solidarity between workers of different races was at times shaky because of the racial inequalities observed in the workplace.
6. Kompe is referring to the 1976 student protests in Soweto where an estimated 176 students were killed by the police who openly shot at them (See Brink, Malungane, Lebelo, Ntshangase and Krige, 2006).
7. The events of this strike are reported by Hemson, Legassick and Ulrich (2006) and Webster (1988). However, since the language used in writing about the strikes during this period is not gender specific (often suggesting that the shop stewards who were leading the strikes were male), Kompe's leadership as a woman shop steward in this struggle is not indicated.

## References

- Andersen, Margaret L. and Patricia Hill Collins. 2010. "Why Race, Class and Gender Still Matter" in M. L. Andersen and P. H. Collins (eds.) *Race, Class and Gender: An Anthology*. Seventh Edition. USA: Wadsworth Cengage Learning.
- Baskin, Jeremy. 1991. *Striking Back: A History of COSATU*. London and New York: Verso.
- Berger, Iris. 1992. *Threads of Solidarity: Women in South African Industry 1900-1980*. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.
- Brink, Elsabe; Malungane, Ghandi; Lebelo, Steve; Ntshangase, Dumisane and Krige Sue. 2006. *SOWETO 16 June 1976: Personal Accounts of the Uprising*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Buhlungu, Sakhela. 2010. *A Paradox of Victory: COSATU and the Democratic Transformation in South Africa*. Scottsville: UKZN Press.
- Della Porta, Donatella and Mario Diani. 2006. *Social Movements: An introduction*. First Edition. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Franzway, Suzanne. 2001. *Sexual Politics and Greedy Institutions: Union Women, Commitments and Conflicts in Public and Private*. Australia: Pluto Press.
- Hassim, Shireen. 2004. "Nationalism, Feminism and Autonomy: The ANC in Exile and the Question of Women", *Journal of Southern African Studies*. 30(3), pp. 433-455.
- Hemson, Dave; Legassick, Martin and Ulrich, Nicole. 2006. "White Activists and the Revival of the Workers' Movement" in South African Democratic Education Trust (SADET) (ed.) *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol. 2 1970-1980*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.
- Mashinini, Emma. 1989. *Strikes Have Followed Me All My Life: A South African Autobiography*. London: The Women's Press Limited.
- South African Labour Bulletin. 1980. *Special Report*. 9(3), pp.11.
- Sithole, Jabulani and Sifiso Ndlovu. 2006. "The Revival of the Labor Movement, 1970-1980" in South African Democratic Education Trust (SADET) (ed.) *The Road to Democracy in South Africa, Vol 2 1970-1980*. Pretoria: Unisa Press.

- Tshoaedi, Malehoko. 1999. *Functional Differentiation in Trade Union Employment: A Study of Gender Inequality with Specific Reference to Women Union Officials*, MA Thesis, University of Witwatersrand.
- Waylen, Georgina. 2005. "Analysing Women in the Politics of the Third World" in H. Afshar (ed.) *Women and Politics in the Third World*. USA and Canada: Routledge.
- Webster, Eddie. 1988. "The Rise of Social-movement Unionism: The Two Faces of the Black Trade Union Movement in South Africa," in Frankel et al. (eds.) *State, Resistance and change in South Africa*. London: Croom Helm.
- Von Holdt, Karl. 2003. *Transitions from Below: Forging Trade Unionism and Workplace Change in South Africa*. Natal: UKZN Press.