

THE TRANSFORMATION OF WORK: CHALLENGES AND STRATEGIES



# Bringing Back the Heart: The Gender at Work Action Learning Process with Four South African Trade Unions



*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 consortium partners—the Rutgers University School of Management and Labor Relations and Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)—to document challenges to decent work and the strategies workers and their organizations engage to overcome those challenges.

This report was made possible through support provided by the Office of Democracy and Governance, Bureau for Democracy, Conflict, and Humanitarian Assistance, U.S. Agency for International Development, under the terms of Award No. AID-OAA-L-11-00001. The opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the U.S. Agency for International Development. Any errors found in the research are the author's own.

# **Bringing Back the Heart:**

**The Gender at Work Action Learning Process**

**with Four South African Trade Unions**

### **Authorship and Acknowledgements**

The Solidarity Center commissioned this report in 2012 to explore the Gender at Work approach as it furthered gender equality objectives with four labor unions in South Africa.

Michel Friedman, manager of the Gender at Work South Africa Program and Gender at Work facilitator/mentor, wrote the introductory chapter and the case study on Sikhula Sonke.

Nina Benjamin, Labour Research Service gender coordinator and Gender at Work facilitator/mentor, wrote the case studies on the Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) and the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA).

Shamim Meer, facilitator of Gender at Work knowledge management in 2005-2006 and facilitator of writing processes in 2010-2011, wrote the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) case study. She also led the team in writing the concluding chapter and edited the report.

Michel Friedman managed and coordinated the process of developing the case studies. Michel would like to acknowledge and thank Gender at Work colleagues who have been important in influencing her thinking and practice—Aruna Rao, David Kelleher, Ray Gordezky, Srilatha Batliwala and Gender at Work facilitators and documentalists who have worked on these different processes: Makhosazana Xaba, Lungisa Huna, Nina Benjamin, Fazila Gany, Celeste Fortuin, Shamim Meer, Maia Marie, Daniela Prado-Castro, Susan Holland-Muter, Nosipho Twala and Kwezilomso Mbandazayo.

September 2013

## CONTENTS

1. Gender at Work Action Learning Program  
as an Approach to Furthering Gender Equality Page 4
2. SACCAWU Case Study:  
Bringing Gender Equality to the Center of Union Work Page 14
3. Sikhula Sonke Case Study:  
Challenging Deep-rooted and Pervasive Exploitation  
and Internalized Oppression Page 34
4. BCAWU and HOSPERSA Case Studies Page 58  
Critical Reflection and Action for Gender Equality
5. Conclusion: What Can We Learn from  
Gender at Work's Experiences with Trade Unions? Page 84

## Chapter 1

### Gender at Work Action Learning Program as an Approach to Furthering Gender Equality

Gender at Work partners with organizations around the world that have recognized the limits of traditional gender mainstreaming approaches<sup>1</sup> and are seeking alternatives. The Gender at Work approach promotes women's empowerment and gender equality through addressing institutional norms and rules (stated and implicit) that maintain women's unequal position in societies.<sup>2</sup> These institutional rules determine who gets what, what counts, who does what and who decides. They include values that maintain the gendered division of labor, prohibitions on women owning land, restrictions on women's mobility and perhaps most fundamentally, the devaluing of reproductive work. Institutional rules are lived out through organizations which are the social structures that exist in any society.

Through the Gender Action Learning Process (GALP), we attempt to combine feminist thinking and practice with insights from organizational development to build internal cultures of equality and contribute to the transformation of cultural norms that support achieving gender equality and social justice.

Since the formation of Gender at Work in the 1990s, we have worked with a range of organizations, including international development groups, labor unions, governments, women's networks and community based organizations in India, Southern Africa and the Horn of Africa. Our work with labor unions is specific to South Africa and was facilitated by our partnership with the Labour Research Services, a labor support organization based in Cape Town.

This set of case studies explores Gender at Work's approach to furthering gender equality objectives within four trade unions participating in the Gender at Work South Africa Gender Action Learning Program: the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU); Sikhula Sonke; Building, Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) and Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA).

In this chapter, we describe the Gender at Work Action Learning Process (GALP), its underlying assumptions about change and its methodology. In chapters two through to five, we discuss how the four trade unions engaged in this process, we explore what worked well and we examine the factors that led to advancing gender equality in these four trade unions. In the final chapter, we pull together key reflections on the Gender at Work Action Learning Process in the context of trade union struggles to advance worker rights.

---

<sup>1</sup> Rao and Kelleher (eds.), *Gender at Work: Organisational Change for Equality*, Kumarian Press, 1999, [http://www.gendematwork.org/sites/gendematwork.org/files/resources/GAW\\_REDUCE\\_2-3\\_0.pdf](http://www.gendematwork.org/sites/gendematwork.org/files/resources/GAW_REDUCE_2-3_0.pdf) (accessed on May 20, 2013); Kelleher and Rao: 2005, "Is There Life after Gender Mainstreaming?" in *Gender and Development*, Vol. 13, No. 2, July 2005; [http://www.gendematwork.org/sites/gendematwork.org/files/resources/gaw\\_is\\_there\\_life\\_after\\_gender\\_mainstreaming.pdf](http://www.gendematwork.org/sites/gendematwork.org/files/resources/gaw_is_there_life_after_gender_mainstreaming.pdf) (accessed on May 20, 2013); Mukhopadhyay, Maitrayee, Gerard Steehouwer and Franz Wong, *Politics of the Possible: Gender and Organizational Change Experiences from the Field*, Oxfam, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Kelleher and Rao, "What Is Gender at Work's Approach to Gender Equality and Institutional Change?" n.d., <http://www.gendematwork.org/article/what-is-gender-at-work-s-approach-to-gender-equality-and-institutional-change> (accessed on May 20, 2013).

## Gender at Work Approach in South Africa

The Southern African region emerges from a history of colonialism, apartheid, uneven development, massive inequality between rich and poor and significant wars of liberation in which many women were active members.

In the post-apartheid era, South Africa has one of the most progressive constitutions in the world. Some 40 percent of parliamentarians are women, many women hold senior positions in government, and numerous policies and a plethora of institutional structures support gender equality, including the National Commission for Gender Equality. At the same time, South Africa has one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world; high rates of HIV infection, particularly among low-income women; and the euphemistically termed “hate crimes” in which gay and transsexual-identified people, and particularly lesbian-identified women, are murdered because of their sexual orientation.

The social and economic conditions of the region stemming from war, political and economic developments and environmental crises have traumatized many people. In turn, these conditions have resulted in dire consequences for cultural change and have made it difficult to harness energy to engage in relationships in new ways. As Nicaraguan social psychologist Martha Cabrera<sup>3</sup> has noted:

“Personal change is key to organizational processes. There can be no social change without personal change, because one is forced to fight every day to achieve that change ... Reconstructing the sense of our national and personal histories is a path to understanding that there is meaning in what we are and what we have lived through despite everything, and this is what allows us to go forward in life. But going forward is only possible if people can find new energy ... We begin to reconstruct both the social fabric and ourselves insofar as we allow ourselves to work through our personal history and open ourselves up to this possibility. So many projects have the stated goal of ‘reconstructing the social fabric,’ but who reconstructs a society’s fabric? People do. So first we have to reconstruct people. This recognition should lead us to analyze the development model we are proposing in our projects. Are they really people-centered projects?”

In light of the South African context, and with the understanding that gender inequality is always interwoven with other inequalities (such as class and race) and embodied in people’s daily lives and practices, Gender at Work has deliberately searched out methods for working with individuals and organizations to increase agency and facilitate hope and the possibility of new ways of thinking, seeing and being. Our work is designed to encourage and support sustained activism and initiatives to create new cultures of equality. We strive to see the effects of our work resonate more deeply in the quality of women’s and men’s everyday personal lives, relationships and work.

While we are primarily working with the **consequences** of the many macro and structural issues that create oppressive living and working conditions—such as the effects of globalization, entrenched neoliberalism and patriarchy—our starting point is to build the power of individuals to engage in sustained collective actions which have the potential to shift existing behaviors and institutional norms. Through recovering a sense of personal agency and hope, rebuilding relationships and questioning what is really important, individuals can feel empowered to act in the face of the overwhelming power of the macro issues.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cabrera, Martha, “Living and Surviving In a Multiply Wounded Country,” n.d., <http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/1629>, (accessed on May 20, 2013).

While we work with individuals, we simultaneously work with a sense of the “whole.” Our approach of “situated learning” goes beyond rational or intellectual capacities. We seek to address the **whole being**—body, heart, mind and spirit.<sup>4</sup> We engage in a way that develops a different relationship culture, one in which individuals begin to trust that reflecting deeply and honestly on experience is what helps create change. To develop this relationship culture, the Gender at Work approach facilitates supportive reflection spaces and enables participants to develop creative strategies.

Our approach is counter to environments dominated by heterosexual, patriarchal, racist, bureaucratic or capitalist social norms. It is also counter to usual gender training or gender mainstreaming approaches adopted by unions or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).

In the GALP, Gender at Work attempts to enable participants to find their voice and overcome historical silencing, to support both women’s empowerment and the creation of new and more equal gendered norms at the institutional level. Gender at Work accomplishes this by:

- Creating **learning spaces** in which participants learn skills of reflection, deep listening to many voices, dialogue and the skill to challenge and be challenged in non-judgmental ways.
- Assisting participants to **uncover the internalized perspectives and behaviors** developed under conditions of exploitation or oppression that are devaluing, diminishing and self-deprecating. Participants are challenged to reflect upon and interrogate how they are living their lives at home and at work, to examine **everyday practices of power**, to reflect on the ways they might be cultivating behaviors that **perpetuate** ongoing inequalities and the ways in which they are **challenging** existing inequalities and working toward creating new, more equal, gender norms—for example, in relation to leadership, gender and violence. We reflect with participants on the ways in which these internalized perspectives can lead activists to unwittingly perpetuate their own oppression and that of others, even while espousing the need to fight oppression. Through the Gender at Work approach, practice and exposure to these internalized views can be challenged and participants can begin to experience themselves in new ways.
- **Raising awareness around power** and one’s own relation to power.<sup>5</sup> Gender at Work attempts to help build participants’ power **within** (at an individual level); power **with** (at a collective level); power **to** (at individual and collective levels); and to challenge power **under** (victim thinking/behavior).
- Emphasizing **democratic practices of facilitation** that focus on inclusion and creating opportunities for participants to experience what it feels like to be valued and treated equally.
- Introducing participants to some **simple body-mind-spirit practices** drawn from a popular education tool intended to assist resource-poor communities heal from various types of trauma, to build resilience and greater social connectedness.<sup>6</sup> This gives participants tools to better manage their own energy. Gender at Work’s practice is informed by the view that if we as

---

<sup>4</sup> Friedman, Michel, “Becoming the Change You Want to See in the World,” *Feminist Popular Education in Transnational Debates: Building Pedagogies of Possibility*, Linzi Manicom and Shirley Walters (eds.), Palgrave Press, Macmillan, 2012.

<sup>5</sup> Gender at Work draws from the following on power: Srilatha Batliwala, “Defining Women’s Empowerment: A Conceptual Framework,” *Education for Women’s Empowerment*, ASPBAE Position Paper for the Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing, September 1995, New Delhi, Asia-South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education; Just Associates, “Making Change Happen: Power, Concepts for Revisioning Power for Justice, Equality and Peace,” 2007; Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities. Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, Verso, London, 1994; Steven Wineman, “Power-Under. Trauma and Nonviolent Social Change,” 2003. Available at no cost, [www.TraumaAndNonviolence.com](http://www.TraumaAndNonviolence.com), (accessed on May 20, 2013).

<sup>6</sup> See [www.capacitar.org](http://www.capacitar.org) (accessed on May 20, 2013).

activists don't look after ourselves, we will not be able to carry on the work. Also if we don't look after our organization, we cannot do our work.

- Working with the **power of awareness** (knowledge and understanding that reframes what is visible), the **power of contact** (joining with others in a process of discovery and planning, moving from isolation and alienation to connection) and the **power of action** (learning by doing something new or different).

Through their change projects, participants are required **to do** something different in the world—to experiment with creating new practices of power in their families, organizations and communities and then to reflect on what they have learned. This makes the new concepts come alive in important ways in their own lives.

In designing learning spaces, we consciously attempt to model a new norm in which participants feel confident and not judged, in an atmosphere in which they treat each other respectfully and are inclusive of difference and are open, constructively critical and able to be themselves while communicating with honesty. The space seeks to value and accept women's voices and experiences. In this space, silences can be broken, participants can see through their blind spots, and become aware of shadow issues. We take care that this space (and process) is not prescriptive, not controlling, so that the participating organizations can own what they do. The space is created to stimulate creativity and a culture that prevents harassment of any kind, where participation is encouraged and responsibility is shared. In other words, at every level of the process, the use of "power over" is reduced and diminished whenever possible. In many workshops participants define these spaces as "safe."

### **Here's how the action learning, peer-learning process works<sup>7</sup>**

In our South African program, Gender at Work entered a partnership with the Labour Research Service (LRS) in 2008. Gender at Work was interested in engaging further with trade unions in South Africa and the LRS was looking for new and creative ways to support trade unions in their struggle for gender equality. Nina Benjamin, who at the time was the recently appointed LRS gender and organization development program coordinator, joined the Gender at Work facilitation team. In addition to working with the Gender at Work Action Learning processes, she drew on the Gender at Work Approach to strengthen LRS work in advancing gender equality and women's empowerment.

Typically, the Gender at Work action learning begins with a negotiation process between Gender at Work and the LRS and participating organizations. The Gender at Work process is based on an **action-learning and peer learning model**. A typical peer learning, action-learning<sup>8</sup> process can include change teams from **between three and six organizations** participating in an 18-month to two-year peer learning process.

---

<sup>7</sup> This section draws from Friedman and Ray Gordezky, "A Holistic Approach to Gender Equality and Social Justice," *OD Practitioner*, 43 (1): 11-16, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> Action learning involves small groups working on complex challenges, taking action and learning as individuals, as teams and as organizations. Action learning's power derives, in part, from its ability to transform internal, invisible psychological worlds, at the same time as individuals and teams are engaged in changing the external visible practices and systems in their institutions and communities. See Marquardt, M.J., Leonard, S., Freedman, A., and Hill, C., *Action Learning For Developing Leaders And Organizations*, American Psychological Press, 2009.

To facilitate learning across organizations and to bring as much of the wider system as possible into the room, we selected organizations that complement each other because they represent a diverse range of experiences and interests.

Each organization selects a “change team” comprised of three or four people who lead the organization in a change project to achieve greater gender equality. Change team members are thus organizational “change agents.” We encourage organizations to select change team members who represent the diversity of their own organizational system while having some degree of influence in the union, and to select those who are interested in and will work toward gender equality.

In the case of organizations with mixed gender memberships, we encourage the inclusion of at least one man in the change team. Gender activists have at times been unwilling to involve men in their change teams—as in the case of SACCAWU—preferring to preserve the space in the Gender Action Learning Process for women’s empowerment. The change teams of Sikula Sonke, BCAWU and HOSPERSA included men.

While the Gender Action Learning process is definitely enhanced when senior members with formal organizational authority are involved in the change team, the process can be valuable even without this level of engagement.

Over an 18-month to two-year period, the change teams from the different organizations come together two or three times to reflect on and share what they are learning from their change projects. Gender at Work facilitators work most directly with the change team members and in some cases, also might work with the entire organization or significant parts of it.

Since 2008, an orientation meeting developed from our experience in previous years, in which the change teams from the three to six organizations learn about each other (personally, organizationally and about the communities they serve) and about the Gender at Work methodology. By the end of the orientation meeting, the organizations are better able to decide whether they want to participate in the Gender Action Learning Process, or whether they wish to withdraw.

After an organization has committed to the process, the next step is a two-day **“hearing our stories” meeting**, held separately with each organization’s change team at the organization’s office. Through storytelling and visual collages, Gender at Work facilitators encourage reflection on the history, culture and programs of the organization, and on the conditions and contexts of women’s and men’s lives. The facilitators help each change team generate ideas for the project they might initiate to improve gender relations inside their organization, in workplaces or in the communities where members live.

In addition, change teams are introduced to a form of *tai chi* movement to release tension and free up energy for new understanding and action, as well as to increase a sense of playful relatedness. At these meetings, two Gender at Work facilitators are present. The lead facilitator attends the “hearing the stories” meetings for all the partners. The second facilitator mentors the partner throughout the entire process.

The process then unfolds with three action-learning, peer learning workshops and ongoing support or mentoring in the form of one-on-one consultations with organizations between action learning meetings. More recently, we have added a writing process after the change project is completed. All Gender at Work facilitators attend the peer learning meetings which a documentalist carefully records.

**The First Action Learning Workshop** brings together the change teams from all participating organizations. To deepen the capacity of the peers to engage each other meaningfully, each team introduces its organization to the others, creatively presenting a summary of what it learned during the hearing the stories meeting. This is the start of reflecting themselves back to each other.

Participants are then introduced to Gender at Work's adaptation of Ken Wilber's "integral framework"<sup>9</sup> (see below) after which they examine their own organization in terms of the framework, and so experience the framework as an analytical and action planning tool. The framework, which encourages participants to appreciate quantitative and qualitative changes at personal and systemic levels, involves participants in two exercises. First, they ask themselves what it is they are trying to change in the world in terms of gender equality. Second, they ask what it is they are trying to change inside their own organization. These exercises give participants a chance to reflect deeply on the relationship between practices inside their organizations and to compare this with what they are doing in the world. The exercises build analytical capacity and require change team members to work together and negotiate their responses. This engagement also builds the team. At the end of these exercises, team members are asked to explore gaps in their practices, and they then use these insights to inform their change plans. The analytical and reflective work facilitates new perspectives on their everyday practices.

From feedback on these exercises, we have learned that the task of analyzing and planning is typically left to men in leadership and to the bosses. So when we are told "this makes me feel powerful," we realize we are contributing toward changing norms while developing leadership skills. In patriarchal, racist and capitalist systems, women and workers generally do not get the opportunities to think or plan.

In addition to learning analytical skills, participants also learn to work as a team. We encourage honest communication and we build capacities to work respectfully even in the face of disagreements. The workshop space is supportive, drawing on techniques of appreciative inquiry,<sup>10</sup> enabling team members to experience each other differently. This environment has profoundly affected change team members, who have often experienced abuse and discrimination while receiving little respect in their own lives. When change team members begin to feel what it is like to be respected, it becomes a little easier for them to behave respectfully with others.<sup>11</sup>

After they complete their analyses, change teams are supported as they develop plans for change projects. The planning process often challenges existing perceptions and offers new ways of seeing. The change projects are intended to be innovative or experimental, giving the team and thus the organization a chance to do something new or different. In the Gender Action Learning Process, planning is a practical tool to bring about change in the world and immediately resonates with participants' everyday realities. In the ongoing process of reflection, the team and organization have an opportunity to learn what works and what does not work from their own experiences.

---

<sup>9</sup> Wilbur, Ken, *A Brief History of Everything*. Shambhala, 1996.

<sup>10</sup> Appreciative Inquiry is a philosophy of human organization and change that highlights processes for positive change. It is an approach that focuses on what gives life and vitality to people, teams and organizations when they are at their best. It thus affirms people's strengths, focusing on what works and who we are at our best. See <http://appreciativeinquiry.case.edu/intro/whatisai.cfm> (accessed on May 21, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> For instance, one change team member from Sikula Sonke observed: "You create an environment to stop the gossip and encourage people to talk directly to each other." (Peer Learning Workshop 3).

Peers are given the opportunity to ask change team members difficult questions and to challenge their plans and presentations. This gives change teams an opportunity to improve their plans and get greater clarity. Feedback from peers, rather than from "outside experts" creates a new value, enabling change team members to become more confident and start to see themselves as "experts" who have something to offer. Following the first workshop, participants implement their change plans, supported by a Gender at Work facilitator who mentors them in their organizational setting. The implementation period before a second action learning workshop is typically between six and eight months.

During the **Second Action Learning workshop**, change teams share what they have done to implement their change projects, how they have done so and what they are achieving. Some change teams might have been unable to change anything, while others may have altered and sharpened the focus of their change projects. Change teams reflect on lessons learned and receive feedback from their peers and from the Gender at Work facilitators.

Gender at Work facilitators introduce concepts and processes for working with personal and organizational power, they help participants deepen their peer-learning practices and they support utilizing the Gender at Work Framework to assess the change project. Finally, change teams revise their change projects based on their insights and the feedback. During the next six months, change teams continue working on their change projects, supported by a Gender at Work Facilitator. The nature of this support depends upon the union and what the change team members ask for. Gender at Work facilitators might send change team members articles to read or questions to think about, and will typically check in with change team members at least once a month in between workshops.

At the **Third Action Learning Workshop**, change team members are invited to tell stories about their change process, to identify factors responsible for the changes and to describe how the changes came about. Where relevant, Gender at Work facilitators assist in developing deeper insight into and understanding of the issues that emerged during the change projects.

### **Learning from doing**

Gender at Work facilitators have been learning as we have gone along and our team has discovered the value of adapting the process and the questions for the varying conditions and contexts of each group. Although the overall design of the process and the objectives of the peer learning sessions remain broadly similar, there have been some differences with each group of participating organizations.

The four South African trade unions in this set of case studies have been part of different processes during different periods of Gender at Work's South African program. SACCAWU's participation began during Gender at Work's teething period, beginning in 2005, when the process involved two peer-learning meetings. By the time SACCAWU had begun its second change project with Gender at Work in 2008, Gender at Work had learned that the process was more effective with three peer learning meetings. Sikhula Sonke's participation in the Gender at Work Peer Learning Process began in 2008 when Gender at Work for the first time worked with community-based organizations and engaged in a writing process. BCAWU and HOSPERSA are participating in a process that began in February 2012 and which continues at the time of writing. This round is innovative in that it is guided by a theme:<sup>12</sup> the interconnections between gender-based violence, women's economic empowerment and HIV/AIDS.

---

<sup>12</sup> Determined by the donor, Joint Gender Fund.

These case studies represent four unions diverse in terms of history, size, membership demographics, political and ideological affiliation and economic sector. Each union entered the GALP at different moments in its own "gender journey." We hope that the detailed stories in the following chapters demonstrate that while our process was broadly generic, there is still no formula, and we responded to each situation in a unique way.

Before turning to the case studies we elaborate on the Gender at Work Framework.

**Gender at Work Framework**

Gender at Work has adapted Ken Wilbur’s integral framework to encompass supporting women’s empowerment, actualizing women’s rights and challenging unequal gender relations through effecting change at the individual levels of consciousness and at the collective or systemic levels of culture and informal practices of exclusion and formal laws and policies. Changes at each of these levels are imperative and we recognize the value of discerning the assumptions made at each level and showing how each area impacts the others. In practice, we work with this framework in a dynamic, context-specific way and never as a checklist. The framework’s strength is that it helps interrogate the relationships between levels and shows how influential informal cultural norms are in shaping the rules of the game by which organizations and society operate.

<b>INDIVIDUAL</b>			
<b>Informal/subjective</b>	<b>WOMEN’S AND MEN’S CONSCIOUSNESS</b>	<b>ACCESS TO RESOURCES</b>	<b>Formal/objective</b>
	<b>CULTURE INFORMAL RULES OF THE GAME WHAT EXCLUDES, WHAT WE TAKE FOR GRANTED</b>	<b>FORMAL POLICIES AND LAWS, RULES OF THE GAME</b>	
<b>SYSTEMIC</b>			

**Consciousness** involves women’s and men’s consciousness at the individual level, such as the extent of commitment to greater equality and women’s rights and the willingness to take action to empower women. It also includes processes by which individuals make meaning and construct identity. For example, mindsets shift in accepting women’s rights to claim income for themselves and their families. Some of the changes we are seeking at the level of experience are increased

- inter- and intra-personal consciousness and commitment to gender equality and feminist values among staff and membership;
- commitment of leadership to gender equality;
- capacity for dialogue and conflict management;
- respect in the way people are treated;
- efforts to make women feel valued and confident.

We attempt to achieve shifts in consciousness through self- and collective-reflection, mentoring, free

writing and journaling, meditation, setting intentions, *tai chi* and other Capacitar<sup>13</sup> practices, personal story telling and sharing information about different forms of power.

**Access to resources** focuses on resources for women (which generally support women's empowerment and surfaces questions about "which" women, thus raising awareness of class, race and other differences among women). Examples include access to jobs, health care (e.g., maternity leave), education, leadership positions, increased security and freedom from violence and communication skills. This area tends to receive the bulk of attention in work on gender equality and there is no doubt that access to resources has required this attention. However, without changes at other levels, resources alone will not result in sustained gender equality. We seek to increase:

- Women's access to training courses and conferences
- Women's access to equal pay and benefits
- Access to information about women's rights or violence against women or sexual harassment
- Access to economic resources to implement training or projects devoted to advance equality
- Women's involvement in leadership positions at all levels
- Freedom from fear/access to safe environments and safe spaces
- Deep listening/access to spaces where women are heard and their opinions and experience are taken seriously

**Formal systemic level** includes visible social and power structures, laws, policies and procedures. The changes we are trying to effect are:

- Inclusion of gender equality objectives in all aspects of union life, including its constitution, policies, strategies and programs
- Union policies and procedures for anti-harassment, work-family arrangements and fair employment
- Accountability mechanisms to hold governance structures responsible to women members (examples include gender policy; child care policy; codes of conduct)

**Culture** focuses on what we see as "normal," the "taken-for-granted" ways of doing things in a union or workplace; traditions, norms and practices that exclude and devalue women and privilege men and limit women's opportunities to exercise their rights, including overriding formal laws or constitutions that mandate equality. For instance, in many trade unions in South Africa, the majority of members are women, but men dominate leadership structures and women still struggle to get issues of concern to them onto the collective bargaining agenda. This struggle continues despite change efforts and conference resolutions that support gender equality.

Changes we are trying to effect include:

- Acceptance of women's leadership
- Organizational ownership of gender issues

---

<sup>13</sup> Capacitar practices are relatively simple exercises developed to assist people from resource-poor and traumatized communities to heal themselves in body, mind and spirit. The practices focus on mindfulness of inner experience via breath and simple movement—plus connecting to the energy of the earth and community broadly defined. For more details, see [www.capacitar.org](http://www.capacitar.org) (accessed on May 21, 2013).

- Acceptance of needed work-family adjustments
- Recognition of invisible and unpaid union work
- Placing women's issues firmly on the agenda and ensuring women's voices, opinions and experiences are valued (including those of diverse sexual orientations)
- Respectful and inclusive work practices
- Inclusive decision-making practices and information sharing
- Criteria for success—that is, what gets rewarded when it comes to women's and men's contributions
- Acceptance of women and men doing tasks and jobs that are not traditional, (i.e., men cleaning the kitchen and making tea or doing childcare while women lead)
- Equal pay for equal work

Both the formal, systemic level and the culture/exclusionary practices levels attempt to address the more complex social and gender relations of power that shape the conditions in which women's empowerment work takes place. We have learned that it is very difficult to create new, more inclusive norms unless both women and men are involved in the process.

## Chapter 2

### SACCAWU: Bringing Gender Equality to the Union's Core

#### 2.1 Introduction

A change team from the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union (SACCAWU) worked with Gender at Work through two processes of gender equitable organizational change. The first took place in 2005-2006 and the second in 2008-2009. SACCAWU is affiliated with the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), and organizes workers in the hospitality, catering, retail, service, tourism and finance sectors. At the time of the Gender at Work Change project, SACCAWU had a membership of 107,553 workers,<sup>14</sup> some 65 percent of whom were women.

SACCAWU's roots lie in the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA), founded in 1975, with a woman, Emma Mashinini, as its first general secretary. In line with COSATU's call for one union in one industry, CCAWUSA in 1989 merged with two other unions, the Cape Liquor and Catering, Hotel and Restaurant Workers Union (HARWU) and Retail and Allied Workers Union (RAWU). This merger brought together unions with different traditions. For example, CCAWUSA more directly challenged apartheid rule and employers, while the other unions were more inclined to accommodate both apartheid and employers. Each of these unions also had different ideas on gender equality.

#### **The context prior to the Gender at Work Partnership**

Although SACCAWU leadership was proud of the union's track record in advancing gender equality over the years, and had a woman first vice president by 2001, there were still many challenges within SACCAWU at the start of the Gender at Work Change Project. The union's track record included landmark agreements on paid maternity leave and the distinction of being the first trade union in South Africa to employ a full-time gender coordinator. By 2001, gender equality work in SACCAWU was driven by the SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator working with a National Gender Committee.<sup>15</sup> One of their main strategies was ensuring that at least two women served on all national and regional union structures. Often, one of these women was elected with the second as an ex officio member.

Patricia Appolis, who was appointed SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator in 1994, is the longest serving trade union national gender coordinator in South Africa. Her tenure gave SACCAWU continuity in the leadership of its gender equality work. Three additional factors helped ensure the union's gender work was focused and had some authority: Patricia is a feminist, which means she sees the importance of women's rights alongside their rights as workers and citizens; she came to the position of national gender coordinator with sound organizational knowledge and experience gained through her previous positions in SACCAWU, beginning in 1990 as regional finance administrator and later as regional gender coordinator and regional organizer;<sup>16</sup> and she had won the respect of SACCAWU leadership for her commitment, knowledge and experience.

---

<sup>14</sup> Membership in 2013 at the time of writing was 147,000.

<sup>15</sup> The National Gender Committee was made up of two elected women leaders from each region, members of the national working committee, the deputy general secretary (a man), the first deputy president (a woman) and three department heads.

<sup>16</sup> This is in marked contrast with the more typical situation in South Africa in which trade unions tended to appoint administrators with low skill levels and little authority to the position of gender coordinator.

A key challenge, however, was that despite all these advances and advantages, SACCAWU leadership was still dominated by men reluctant to challenge the deeply held cultural beliefs that reinforced men's power over women. This dynamic meant that although women made up 65 percent of union members, they constituted only 35 percent of union leadership.

The SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator noted that she seemed to be constantly raising issues that were not popular among her male head office colleagues. Further, these colleagues tended to see gender equality work as having little to do with them because such work was the job of the national gender coordinator and the union's all-women gender committees. In this context, the gender coordinator and the gender structures seemed to be in continual battle mode. The National Gender Committee functioned as a vital space for the empowerment and support of women leaders, providing an important source of support to the national gender coordinator and serving as a space where women leaders were able to strategize. On the positive side, this meant the union had structures for addressing gender equality. On the down side, it tended to marginalize gender equality as a concern of the gender appointees and gender structures and resulted in the neglect of gender equality concerns when the gender appointees were not at meetings. Also, because the gender positions and gender structures were peopled by women, this relegated gender equality to women's work.

SACCAWU's National Gender Committee struggled to get more women in leadership at all levels of the union. Union congresses had repeatedly rejected a call for quotas to ensure more women in leadership, but in 2001, congress delegates had agreed to a National Gender Committee proposal to increase the number of women on union committees through appointment of additional women members in an *ex officio* capacity. The National Gender Committee saw this as a means to increase women's visibility in the union, and to provide on-the-job training for women members in union work, in a context where they had not been able to win a quota for women's leadership.

In addition to taking up the demand for women on union structures, the National Gender Committee addressed two issues key to women workers: sexual harassment and parental rights. Despite a sexual harassment policy, the union did not address sexual harassment adequately—women in union meetings and congresses were not safe from men's jeers, whistles and, in extreme cases, from threatening and unwanted sexual advances. As part of their ongoing efforts to ensure that the union addressed sexual harassment, the National Gender Committee worked on a sexual harassment manual and looked at ways to educate SACCAWU members on this issue.

Ongoing efforts also focused on ensuring women's leadership on shop steward committees. Store-level shop steward committees were overwhelmingly male spaces. Typically, in a store in which 70 percent of the workers were women, the shop steward committee was made up of one woman and four men. Once on the committee, a woman faced many challenges. In addition to being overruled by men on the committee, societal expectations concerning women's roles at home, coupled with union meeting times designed to suit men's needs, made it difficult for women to function as union leaders. Family and societal expectations which place the burden of household responsibilities on women, while freeing men from such duties, stood in the way of women attending meetings. Union meeting times—local meetings at night and national meetings requiring days away from home—did not take into account women's household responsibilities, husbands control over women's time and women's need for safety when travelling at night. The union did not seem to see the need to support women worker leaders. All of these difficulties led to women's reluctance to stand for elections and resulted in a high dropout rate among women who won shop steward elections.

### **Setting up the SACCAWU/Gender at Work Partnership**

Early in 2005, Gender at Work facilitators, Michel Friedman and Khosi Xaba, approached SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator, Patricia Appolis, to assess her interest in working on the Gender at Work Change Catalyst Program.

Patricia Appolis saw the potential in a partnership with Gender at Work for bringing new ideas to deepen the gender equality work in the union. SACCAWU was in the process of “organizational renewal” in response to job losses and casualization<sup>17</sup> in the sectors it organized—trends which resulted in depleting the unions’ numbers because casual workers with no job security were afraid to join unions. Such workers feared joining the union would result in losing their jobs. The organizational renewal process focused on how to improve the union and deepen some of its long-standing traditions through fresh ideas. SACCAWU gender activists saw the organizational renewal process as a strategic opening for including their ideas on advancing gender equality, to bring new life to their ongoing work on gender equality and as an opportunity to challenge deeply rooted traditions of male dominance. They saw this as a chance to bring attention to how women in the union, and particularly black African women,<sup>18</sup> bore the brunt of economic retrenchment, job insecurity, sexual harassment, lack of child care and maternity benefits.

SACCAWU gender activists decided to focus the work of the Gender at Work change project on setting up worker committees at shopping malls. The union had discussed mall committees since the early 2000s. Given that stores were increasingly located in shopping malls, the union had been looking at setting up mall committees as local-level organizing structures. Mall committees would create solidarity and unity among workers across stores located in one mall, in much the same way as the industrial area committees of the 1980s had done. However, mall committees had not been established and SACCAWU gender activists decided to take on the challenge of setting up mall committees in ways that would make gender equality concerns central to mall committee functioning and thus central to the union’s organizing. In doing this, they saw themselves challenging the practice in which gender equality was seen as the sole concern of SACCAWU gender coordinators and gender structures.

The SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator negotiated with the general secretary of SACCAWU to clear the way for the union’s involvement in the Gender at Work process. She was able to get leadership’s support for the change project because building mall committees was a union campaign that met the union’s need of revitalizing inactive local structures as part of SACCAWU’s organizational renewal process; and because two change team members were centrally involved in the SACCAWU organizational renewal process—SACCAWU’s second vice president who led the organizational renewal process, and SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator who served on the organizational renewal committee and had leadership’s confidence. Both had the union leadership’s respect and trust.

A memorandum of understanding (MOU) between SACCAWU and Gender at Work set out the terms of the partnership:

---

<sup>17</sup> The practice in which workers are employed on a short-term, non-permanent basis.

<sup>18</sup> Given South Africa’s history, i.e., colonial and apartheid domination, race continues to be a factor which determines access to resources in the country, with those most exploited in the past continuing to be the most exploited today. Hence, black African workers experience the most hardship compared with colored, Indian or white workers.

- Build capacity for SACCAWU to make a greater impact on gender equality. This may mean changing attitudes, knowledge, policy, programs or practices within the organization, in its programs or in the way it interacts with members.
- Build knowledge of institutional change for gender equality through thoughtful analysis of experience of practitioners.

Gender at Work facilitators and the SACCAWU Change Team<sup>19</sup> met in May 2005 to establish the key issues the change team wanted to address and to enable the facilitators to get a sense of the specific support the change team would need. These discussions enabled the Gender at Work facilitators to design an effective and relevant support process.

Over the next months, the SACCAWU Change Team developed, planned and implemented its change project drawing on processes of deep reflection and learning facilitated by Gender at Work and involving peer learning with two other organizations: Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) and Women on Farms Program (WFP).

All three organizations worked with working-class and poor women in different contexts. SACCAWU and TAC were membership-based organizations with a majority of women members but with male-dominated leadership. Both were interested in developing women's leadership. WFP, an NGO and not membership based, was more overtly feminist in its approach to organizing farm workers. The idea behind peer learning was that the organizations would learn from each other's experiences and inspire each other to create new ways of working for gender equality.

---

<sup>19</sup> The SACCAWU Change Team made was made up of Patricia Appolis (SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator, Nomsa Ndlovu (Regional Gender Coordinator) and Angy Phethle (SACCAWU Second Deputy President). Angy Phethle left the team, which was joined by Amanda Mkizwana.

## 2.2 The SACCAWU Change Project: Planning, Implementing, Reflecting, Learning

### The 2005-2006 Gender at Work Change Catalyst Process

The process of workshops and ongoing mentoring support helped deepen reflection and challenged change team members to think beyond the “taken-for-granted” strategies to advance gender equality in the union. The following table gives a timeline of key events in this process.

<b>First Organizational Process 2005-2006</b>	
May 2005	Hearing the Stories Workshop—SACCAWU Change Team and Gender at Work facilitators
June 2005	Change Catalyst Workshop with SACCAWU, TAC, WFP
June 2005 – February 2006	Change Team implemented project with support from Gender at Work Facilitator
Feb 2006	Change Catalyst Workshop with SACCAWU, TAC, WFP
<b>Second Organizational Process 2008-2009</b>	
July 2008	Peer Learning Workshop 1 with SACCAWU, TAC, WFP and Justice and Women (JAW)
July 2008 – March 2009	Change team implemented project with support from Gender at Work facilitator
March 2009	Peer Learning Workshop 2 with SACCAWU, TAC, WFP and JAW
March 2009 – October 2009	Change team implemented project with support from Gender at Work Facilitator
October 2009	Peer Learning Workshop 3 with SACCAWU, TAC, WFP and JAW

### Hearing the Stories Workshop–May 2005

The May 2005 Hearing the Stories Workshop included processes of individual, personal reflection, as well as consideration of organizational dynamics, questions of power and broader social change. Change teams reflected on what they wanted to change in their organization or in their work and why they sought change. They reflected on the questions: “What is the organization we want? What does a gender/race equal organization look like?”

To help reflection on these questions and to facilitate the planning of the change projects, Gender at Work facilitators introduced a conceptual framework which emphasized that gender equality work required change at a range of levels and issues, including individual and organizational levels; in women and men’s consciousness; in policies; in culture; and in more equitable access to resources. Often, organizations worked in only one or two of these areas, but attention to all these areas was necessary for lasting change. To build an ideal gender/race equal organization, the following would be needed at each of these areas:

### Individual Change

<p><b>Women’s and men’s consciousness</b></p> <p>Staff knowledgeable and politically consciousness, committed to gender equality and fairness.</p>	<p><b>Women’s condition</b></p> <p>Equal pay, equal opportunities for promotion, education, safety from harassment.</p>
<p><b>Organizational culture and deep structure</b> (informal institutional rules)</p> <p>Value given to gender equality work and to fairness, not simply as espoused values but as deeply held, and evident in the way work-family links are made, in information sharing, in decision-making processes, leadership and management styles and in how the organization does things—that is, in its norms, values and accepted behaviors.</p>	<p><b>Policies and Procedures (governance structures)</b></p> <p>Gender policy, equitable human resource policies, flex-time, sexual harassment policy, accountability.</p>

### Social–systemic change

The SACCAWU Change Team worked through this conceptual framework and reflected on the following questions:

- Were they working at individual, organizational and societal levels?
- Was their work for gender equality focused on changing consciousness?
- Was it aimed at improving access to resources policies and/or culture?

Reflecting on where they were putting their energies encouraged team members to look beyond obvious strategies and highlighted that they needed to do more at the cultural level to shift the gender division of labor in the home, within the family and at the workplace. The process also encouraged change team members to reflect on the need for individual personal change. As one change team member observed: “The change process is not only about the organization, but is also about personal change. It is also about you.”<sup>20</sup>

The SACCAWU Change Team noted that although the union sponsored a leadership program for women, union leadership was dominated by men. Women need to be valued and recognized and they need to be comfortable within the organization. Stereotyped assumptions about roles needed to be challenged. In the words of a change team member: “We don’t talk about what affects us. We need to break the silence on violence against women and sexual harassment. It is important, but so difficult to share experiences with other women.”<sup>21</sup> Change team members felt there was need for space for debate and discussion of the ethics of relationships “on what actually motivates the “three girlfriends” syndrome<sup>22</sup> (current among men in the union), and on how women collude in their own oppression.”<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Change team member, Hearing the Stories Workshop, May 2005.

<sup>21</sup> Change team member, Hearing the Stories Workshop, May 2005.

<sup>22</sup> Men’s belief that they are entitled to have numerous concurrent sexual partners, and perceiving women in the union as legitimate prey.

<sup>23</sup> Change team member, Hearing the Stories Workshop, May 2005.

Despite efforts to train women leaders in SACCAWU in negotiating, campaigns were still dominated by men. The SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator reflected on the difficulties in getting women into negotiations:

“We have raised consciousness, we have provided skills training on how to negotiate. The next step would be to get these women on negotiating teams. To do this, we have to follow processes of selection and this is a very male dominated system. We try to get women to vote for other women but this does not happen. We are trying to motivate for company-based gender coordinators but this is like a brick wall. We need strategies. We have tried at the regional level. We are looking at employment equity and what makes women not want to take positions.”<sup>24</sup>

The change team noted that while policies can help this shift, strong women who can push program implementation were needed. Attempts at organizational change were constantly under threat and gains made had been accompanied by the loss of passion and drive to make change happen.

The change team saw the need to develop alternative models of power and alternative ways of working to break the silence on these issues. “We need to develop an alternative model of working within the organization—to evaluate the culture of silence around gender issues—developing women leaders from shop floor can impact on the national and can help to mainstream gender issues. We have focused on the national to date. We need to work at local level and assess impact in a year’s time.”<sup>25</sup>

### **The change project goal and strategies**

Working through the conceptual framework and getting the insights and responses of other change teams and the Gender at Work facilitators helped the SACCAWU Change Team formulate its change project to facilitate social and systemic change.

The team’s goal was to develop women leaders from shop floor level as a second layer of leadership. Their strategy was to develop one mall committee over one year, in a mall with gender activists. They planned to develop mall committees in ways that challenged silences on issues of concern to women and in ways that would ensure gender equality concerns became central to mall committee functioning. If the change team was successful in infusing gender equality concerns while establishing one mall committee, this could serve as an example in setting up mall committees throughout the country.

The significance of this approach is that it attempted to make gender equality central to the union’s organizing work. Also key was the focus on developing and grooming women leaders at the membership base, and getting more women elected as shop stewards and training them to become gender activists. This marked a shift from the prior focus on women in national and regional leadership.

The change team could draw on forces supporting the project that included the union’s goal of ensuring organizational stability by developing and strengthening mall committees and by building on the union’s formal commitment to developing women leaders and gender activists at all levels. Forces inhibiting the project, which needed to be minimized, included resistance from men who feared losing status if women advanced in union leadership and family culture which burdened women with family and household responsibilities.

---

<sup>24</sup> Patricia Appolis, Hearing the Stories Workshop, May 2005.

<sup>25</sup> Change team member, Hearing the Stories Workshop, May 2005.

Planned activities of the change project between August 2005 and June 2006 included consultation with the mall committee and shop stewards and a program of workshops on sexual harassment, HIV and violence. Time off and transportation were negotiated to enable change team members to participate, because two change team members were worker leaders with full-time jobs in stores. Accountability processes were put in place and the change team provided regular reports. The change team met with the Gender at Work facilitator, Khosi Xaba, every two months for advice, moral support and critical thinking, and the team recorded the process.

### **Implementing the change project up to February 2006**

The Change Catalyst Workshop in February 2006 was designed as a space to reflect upon work undertaken in the change projects since May 2005, to connect with the other organizations and to renew and re-energize spirits. During this process, the facilitators generated an extraordinary depth of reflection on individual and organizational change.

The SACCAWU Change Team reported that in implementing their project of developing a second layer of women leaders at grassroots in one mall committee, their first steps had been to get “buy in” from the union and to set up a system of regular report-backs on their progress.

Next, the Change Team had set about selecting a shopping mall. Their first choice was Eastgate Mall, but the shop steward leading the establishment of this mall committee saw the national gender coordinator and the change team as intruding on his territory and as a threat to his power, and he refused to work with them or give them access to the mall committee process. Their efforts to bring gender equality to the center of setting up this mall committee were thus thwarted.

The change team then looked to the Daveyton Mall. Located in the East Rand, this mall was farther from SACCAWU’s main office than the first mall, and working here would be more costly in terms of time and transport. However, the shop stewards were welcoming and there were potential gender activists to draw into the project.

Daveyton Mall had other advantages compared with Eastgate: With 14 stores, it was a smaller mall and this meant workers were in closer personal contact with each other. Also it was managed by former SACCAWU members. Solidarity in the mall and good relations with the mall management were important considerations, especially because property companies that manage malls were generally hostile to workers—for example, property companies prevented picketing on mall premises.

The conveners of the Daveyton mall committee were a male shop steward and SACCAWU Change Team member Amanda Mkizwana (a shop steward who also worked at this mall). Amanda led activities, contacted the mall coordinators, convened meetings and took minutes. The male shop steward chaired the meetings.

The change team worked with the mall committee, and between May 2005 and February 2006, held three mall committee meetings. The committee drew up operational guidelines for the mall committees, held a workshop on gender equality and ensured women shop stewards were elected. On World Aids Day, the mall committee distributed condoms and educational pamphlets on AIDS. On International Children’s Day, workers at the mall brought children to work to build awareness on parental agreements that had been signed between companies and unions and to ensure that workers were able to access the rights granted by these agreements. The committee expanded its activities to

encompass a broader range of concerns, beyond those traditionally seen as worker rights. They linked work and home life, the public with the so-called private.

The attendance of SACCAWU national officials at some of the events sparked SACCAWU members' interest in attending the mall committee meetings because they wanted to meet these leaders. Leadership buy-in was thus important not only in getting the project off the ground but also in attracting members to mall committee meetings.

So, although mall committee meetings were initially intended for shop stewards, SACCAWU members, both women and men, chose to attend and were allowed to attend. The mall committee thus also expanded the range of participants traditionally engaged in local meetings. In addition to going beyond shop stewards, the change team ensured that more women attended mall committee meetings. The Daveyton mall committee took care to inform women of meetings and activities and encouraged women to run for shop steward positions. As a result, more women were elected as shop stewards.

The change team's strategy demonstrated a different, preferable way of making gender equality a core concern in setting up local level union organizing structures. The SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator noted that "with the new round of elections, more women were being elected at the stores. It was positive that women were electing other women. This could help build the second layer of women leaders and the mall committee."<sup>26</sup>

The SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator led in-depth discussions with the Daveyton mall committee on the role and responsibilities of shop stewards from a gender perspective. These discussions attempted to set new norms for a different leadership style and to create a transparent environment in which leaders could be held accountable. They discussed the issue of male leaders having serial affairs with women members and "for some men there was discomfort as they were doing just that, having affairs. We said there is nothing wrong with having a relationship but having affairs with one woman after another was problematic."<sup>27</sup> All of this injected hope in renewing the unions own democratic processes, from a gender equality perspective.

The work with the mall committee brought renewed energy to change team members. As one change team member noted: "I felt energized after the workshop. Comrades listened to me, they engaged, grappled, and when you see this, you get touched, motivated. You can see a small difference is being made."<sup>28</sup>

Based on the Daveyton experience, the National Gender Committee developed operational guidelines for mall committees. By January 2006, these guidelines were used more broadly within the union which approved a budget for mall committees.

The SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator reported on the change team's work in Daveyton at a joint evaluation and planning meeting of SACCAWU department heads and elected officials in February 2006, a week before the Second Gender at Work Workshop. The deputy general secretary and the general secretary wanted to know whether the change team was setting up mall committees or putting gender into mall committees. The national gender coordinator said they were doing both. She noted: "...Local

---

<sup>26</sup> Patricia Appolis, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>27</sup> Change team member, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Change team member, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

office bearers are scared that mall committees will replace locals. They see something is happening, that we are the ones making inroads, we are seen to be treading on toes and there will be a backlash. They were saying to me, 'Be careful, watch out.'"<sup>29</sup>

These concerns implied two disputes over turf: First, gender structures and gender coordinators were seen as stepping out of their rightful place (as though gender equality can be compartmentalized) and viewed as entering the union's organizing staff's turf. Second, mall committees were seen in competition with, and a potential threat to, union locals<sup>30</sup> or industrial area committees.

The change team faced many additional challenges. These included working from a distance (Amanda was the only change team member on site), lack of budget and lack of time. Unprecedented strike action during that year took time away from planned activities. However, the strikes also served to mobilize mall committees in solidarity actions, and this strengthened the committees.

The Daveyton example served as a model for other mall committees, and by early 2006, seven malls had implemented committees based on the Daveyton model of making gender equality central to mall committees. Three of these seven mall committees were led by women shop stewards.

The Gender at Work process enabled change team members to imagine and implement new ways of working for gender equality. The change team's regular meetings with the Gender at Work facilitator and the peer workshops in which change team members reported on progress, served as both pressure and support to following through on implementation plans.

Change team member Nomsa noted: "My eyes were opened more than ever being with Gender at Work. With the establishment of the mall committees, we have achieved something that we will remember. We have the structure and we have Amanda here today. My aim is to see other women emancipated. The memorable thing is that we went to the grassroots level at the mall. It is not easy to get to the shop floor level since I was a shop steward. With the establishment of the mall committee we were able to sit at grassroots level."<sup>31</sup>

### **Space for reflection, solidarity and support**

The amazing depth of sharing during the February 2006 Gender at Work workshop demonstrated the safe space created and the development of a community of support and solidarity among members from the three organizations, TAC, WFP and SACCAWU. By reflecting on significant moments in their lives and work, change team members unearthed issues around personal struggles and discovered how working on organizational issues can play a part in developing one's "power within" to deal with these struggles. Amanda shared how working on another SACCAWU project, a book on violence against women, had helped her develop the "power within" to leave her husband of 15 years:

"I was like a dog in a kennel, not having food, only shelter. I decided to move out. I'm not a prisoner any more. I stayed to please people that I am a married woman, a happy woman. I wanted that status. I was with him for 15 years. But I did not want to be fake any longer. I can be myself. When we launched a book on violence against women and I was making a summary of the law, I said, 'No, there is violence in

---

<sup>29</sup> Patricia Appolis, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>30</sup> Locals or industrial area committees were local organizing structures set up beginning in the 1980s, bringing workers together in an industrial area or suburb so they could discuss grievances, build solidarity, strategize and mobilize.

<sup>31</sup> Nomsa Ndlovu, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

my home and I must take this step.' Working on the book helped me. As I was reading the legislation and writing on it, I thought, 'This is violence. I must leave.'"<sup>32</sup>

At the same time, the challenges of working for gender equality within SACCAWU became more starkly clear. Patricia shared how some people in the union were warning union members against working with her because although she had a good relationship with her husband, she encouraged other women to leave their husbands. Patricia said she usually ignored these allegations and supported the women. In response to a participant's query about whether learning about gender issues is the main reason women leaders are single or divorced, Patricia said: "Women assert themselves once they are confident of their rights. They challenge power in the household and men are not able to deal with that. This leads to separation and divorce. Some (women) can negotiate, some partners are reasonable. Many women have left husbands after being active in the union."<sup>33</sup>

This raised the need for complementary strategies in working for gender equality in SACCAWU—awareness raising among men and women, women's empowerment and addressing private concerns not typically seen as important. Patricia noted that issues of the private realm are complex and are often missing in union practice. However, it was only women's personal lives (and not men's) that were under the spotlight in the union. "Men's personal lives do not come under similar scrutiny in the union. Men's relationships are not discussed in the union. It is seen as normal for men to have (multiple) relationships. What can we do to build into our strategies something that can help women in leadership?"<sup>34</sup>

The discussion highlighted that change work was emotionally challenging and painful. As Patricia noted, "From the TAC experience of organizing, planning, implementation, I learned that change is very painful, personally and organizationally. I will take this with me and see how I can bolster those affected by change. Not everyone will win when change happens. Some will lose and that will account for conflict."<sup>35</sup>

Amanda noted that "a lot needs to be done to change those resisting transformation. We have to prepare ourselves for the fight. Change is powerful. People do not want to lose what they have."<sup>36</sup>

Facilitator David Kelleher noted that the experiences of all three organizations made him appreciate more starkly "how harassment is used as a weapon to undermine women's power and how this operated at a very deep level."<sup>37</sup> Facilitator Michel spoke about her awareness once more of the "pain of being ostracized. The task is to find a way through the difficult stuff while living lives that are authentic."<sup>38</sup> She posed the question: "Is it worth the pain and what we have to give up? To take risks, have courage? This reminds me that the personal is political, the political is personal, the personal is emotional. What are we asking of ourselves and others when the price is so high. Are we asking everybody to be warriors?"<sup>39</sup>

---

<sup>32</sup> Amanda Mkizwana, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>33</sup> Patricia Appolis, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Patricia Appolis, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Patricia Appolis, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Amanda Mkizwana, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>37</sup> David Kelleher, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>38</sup> Michel Friedman, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>39</sup> Michel Friedman, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

Reflection on the experiences of all the organizations present deepened insights into women's leadership. The discussion led Gender at Work Facilitator David to note that "women's leadership is more than a resolution, a training program, or numbers. A considerable amount of courage is needed to be a woman leader, and to take on the complexities of the position, given family life and gender-based violence. It is also about liberating moments of moving out, building a new life. We have been able to explore some of what it means."<sup>40</sup>

Gender at Work facilitator Michel noted that "confronting power, politics and change is difficult." Especially challenging is working for change "in a way that is respectful of everyone we deal with, and in a way that elicits their respect. We cannot have equal relationships between women and men unless they are respectful relationships. How to make this a part of the process in our ongoing work is a challenge."<sup>41</sup> The work is especially challenging, David noted, because "much as this work is about power and politics, it is about doing it in a way where there are no winners and losers. Because losers want revenge. We need to show there is a better way of living a principled way of being a leader."<sup>42</sup>

Gender at Work facilitators affirmed the courage of the change team members in taking on the challenges and noted what it took to make change happen. David said he learned "the role of courageous leadership. Secondly, listening to these stories has taken an emotional toll. I feel it in my body and in my heart. Thirdly, no change happens without pressure. And no change happens without support. There is need for pressure and need to support men to see where they fit in—otherwise they will just be enemies."<sup>43</sup>

Sharing personal reflections at the workshop encouraged, supported and strengthened the resolve of change team members to continue to take on the challenges of organizational and personal change. Amanda said that this "encourages me to do more as a gender activist. We can change mindsets of women and negative attitudes of men. We can prepare men to be led by women because women have potential and are very powerful. Men set us up to fail. We can be winners." Amanda described how she felt not only supported but also healed by the discussions during the peer learning workshop. She shared that she had not known what to expect before the workshop, but that she had been welcomed and had gained from the process: "When I arrived ... I had a problem. I am not educated—I worried about how I would communicate. I work in the location, I don't speak English in my daily work; I communicate in Sotho and Zulu. I was afraid at first but there was a very strong bond. I felt free, I felt welcomed. I enjoyed your company."<sup>44</sup>

The process enabled introspection and self-awareness. Patricia Appolis shared that it was a "good time to reflect on my role in the whole project. You need to be conscious of how it impacts on you, on your growth in the organization, and not take on too much. As a trade unionist, you always look at the workers, the collective, and you forget yourself and your family life."<sup>45</sup>

---

<sup>40</sup> David Kelleher, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Friedman, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>42</sup> David Kelleher, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>43</sup> David Kelleher, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>44</sup> Amanda Mkizwana, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

<sup>45</sup> Patricia Appolis, Change Catalyst Workshop, February 2006.

## **2.3 The Action Learning Project, 2008-2009**

In 2008, Gender at Work asked Patricia Appolis, SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator, to enter a second partnership of action and reflection on organizational change. She was interested, and saw this as an opportunity to strengthen and deepen the union's ongoing work with mall committees, which had continued since 2006. This time, Gender at Work facilitator Nina Benjamin provided ongoing support to the SACCAWU change team.

This second round with Gender at Work included SACCAWU and three other organizations: TAC, WFP and Justice and Women (JAW), an organization set up to help women access their legal rights around domestic violence and child support.<sup>46</sup> The process ran from July 2008 to October 2009 and included three peer learning workshops. As before, the peer learning workshops were spaces where change teams could share their experiences on their work and their achievements and discuss the challenges they faced. They received feedback, encouragement and support from Gender at Work facilitators and the change teams of each organization. They were challenged to interrogate their practice, to deepen their knowledge and understanding and to develop creative strategies.

At the first Peer Learning Workshop, change teams reflected on and shared their achievements and challenges and described what they were learning. They also made plans going forward to March 2009. At the second Peer Learning Workshop, eight months later, change teams reviewed their activities and results and reflected on strategies that enable individuals, organizations and communities to change. At a third Peer Learning Workshop held seven months later, change teams discussed the primary change their project accomplished; what changed for their membership; their most significant insights; and what they learned from the other change teams.

### **Beginning the second round in July 2008**

Between February 2006 and July 2008, the SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator and the National Gender Committee continued setting up mall committees and strengthening existing mall committees, along with a range of other efforts to advance gender equality work within SACCAWU.

SACCAWU gender activists continued to guard the gender structures as women-only spaces because they believed that "the oppressed cannot be led by the oppressor." They believed that while men can support them, women must lead their own struggle.

In sharing progress on their work in the malls since 2006, the SACCAWU Change Team noted that mall committees were formally incorporated into union structures as part of the SACCAWU organizational restructuring. It was now becoming standard practice that women ran for and were elected into key leadership positions in mall structures. All of this had been made possible through the work of the National Gender Committee.

However, change team members were concerned that the ownership of their project with mall committees had been "hijacked." The national office claimed the achievements with mall committees as that of the national leadership, and did not acknowledge the contribution of the National Gender

---

<sup>46</sup> The SACCAWU Change Team was made up of Amanda Mkizwana, Nomsa Ndlovu, Yvonne (Lucky) Nkadimeng, Patricia Nymanan and Thembi Motlhalane.

Committee in setting up mall committees and in getting mall committees accepted as a national SACCAWU program.

In assessing their achievements, change team members noted that the National Gender Committee's innovation of making gender equality central to mall committees increased the number of women in union structures. More women attended union congresses and ran for leadership positions, from the grassroots mall level to the top national structures. There were more women at the regional, national and local level executive committees.

Other strategies also were behind women's increased willingness to run for leadership positions, including support from the national gender structures; the safe space provided by the gender structures for discussion of challenges they faced; and efforts to encourage women to attend committee meetings to learn, to work collectively and to support each other (despite the attempts of men on committees to frustrate them).

New norms were being created around child care in the union. The gender committee pushed for child care facilities at all union activities so women could attend. To demonstrate that child care was needed, gender committee members brought their children to meetings in their regions. They succeeded in getting the SACCAWU National Congress to agree to the provision of child care for officials, staff and union members as part of national, regional and local budgets. As a change team member noted: "That is how we changed the norm of separating the private life of women from the public of the union. It actually helps to develop a second layer of leadership and we do not have to repeat it for the next generation of members. It is now part of the culture of the organization."<sup>47</sup>

Work continued on making both men and women aware about issues such as sexual harassment, parental rights and childcare. The change team also enlisted men to raise the consciousness of other men on mall committees, on these issues as well as on the issue of sex in exchange for casual work, which women seeking work in malls frequently encountered.

Change team members noted changes evident in men's attitudes. For instance, men on mall committees increasingly invited women to join committees that were previously male dominated. Change team members also said that the SACCAWU deputy general secretary was more supportive of the gender structures and of the change project. SACCAWU leaders were moving closer to accepting a 50/50 gender representation in the union, since this norm was established in mall committees.

At the same time, there were continued challenges with men's attitudes. Men on committees continued to express negative attitudes toward women and were not comfortable when women spoke about gender equality. Women continued to be harassed. Some men said women were "making everything about gender." Women who expressed interest in running for elected positions in the union received phone calls from men seeking to persuade them not to stand. Women on union committees found their ideas denigrated by men on these committees. If a woman did not speak English well, men would make fun of her. Men would shut women down by quoting the union constitution at them and women would not be able to respond because they were not familiar with it. However, women had greater awareness that "women are being used by men," and that men were pitting women against each other and they must resist.

---

<sup>47</sup> Change team member, Peer Learning Workshop 1, July 2008.

### **July 2008 plan for the next Gender at Work change project**

Following their discussions, the SACCAWU Change Team developed a plan for its second change project, and it emerged along similar lines as the first change project. The change team's goal was to build a sustainable pool of second layer of women leaders in the mall committees, leaders who would be confident and empowered to make independent decisions. They sought to move union women out of the shadows. Their idea was that a second round with Gender at Work would enable them to deepen their work with mall committees, involve a broader group of gender activists and sustain their efforts. They wanted to create new norms regarding leadership by empowering women leaders from the grassroots so they could function effectively in union structures and make changes in the union's culture and in how leadership conducts itself. This was different from previous union approaches in which women leaders were drawn from male-dominated union structures (such as local committees).

In addition to fostering alternative forms of leadership, the change team planned to focus on recruiting women to join the gender committees and to enable the local gender committees to work with the mall committees.

Because the change team realized that systematic and patient work was needed to change norms within the union, it planned to focus on a small pool to start chipping away at patriarchal attitudes and male-dominated structures in the union.

Short term, the SACCAWU Change Team sought to see women at the grassroots level (i.e., the shop floor) influence decisions at the highest structures of the union and stand up for their rights so they would no longer be mistreated or harassed.

The change team planned to:

- Work with shop stewards.
- Identify reasons prohibiting women from attending meetings.
- Ensure proper mobilization for quality leadership through recruitment campaigns and identify dedicated women workers interested in becoming representatives voluntarily.
- Set up programs to build a second layer of leadership, including study circles based on a system of "each one teach one," and a mentoring system for sharing information and getting people to learn about the union structures.
- Facilitate the inclusion of mall committees in mainstream programs and integrate mall committees into the union local level committees<sup>48</sup> through submission of reports and attendance at local level meetings which contribute to building leadership from the grassroots to the national level.
- Work with other departments of the union, e.g., the Education Department, to build study circles.
- Integrate gender budgets.

As a first step, the change team would select three malls. Next, the team would establish mall committees in each of these three malls. The mall committees would then be inducted and gender representatives for malls would be elected. The change team would work to ensure that women were present and active in the constitutional structures of the union where decisions are taken, from the mall level on up. The team would develop mall committee members' skills in organization building and help

---

<sup>48</sup> The union local level committees are industrial area committees which predated mall committees.

them understand their committee roles and SACCAWU's constitution, policies and campaigns. The team would also train them on gender issues; on handling grievances such as sexual harassment; on HIV and AIDS policies; and on identifying breaches by employers or other players.

The change team would give progress reports to the local gender committees, and to regional and national gender coordinators; they would evaluate monthly reports submitted to the different levels; and would meet quarterly for updates.

### **March 2009 reflection on actions, and planning next steps**

By March 2009, representatives were appointed in the selected malls and a mall committee was launched in one of the three malls. The change team had achieved this even as it faced challenges in implementing the plan. Change team members noted that while mall committees were accepted union organizing structures, these structures were not given the resources they needed.

The change team lacked finances for transportation to the malls, for induction of new members and for study circles and education activities. They also faced the challenge of time constraints because union activities and the National Congress had taken up much of their time.

In addition, there was constant conflict from the distinction made by union leadership and organizers between gender equality work and "union work"—these were seen as two separate realms. Change team members realized their challenge involved getting SACCAWU to recognize that gender equality work is union work. They realized that change agents needed to find ways to do their gender equality work as part of their regular union functions. Separating out union and gender equality work was problematic.

Reflecting on where they were placing their efforts—on which levels and what issues<sup>49</sup>—the SACCAWU Change Team noted that much of its work involved consciousness raising and changing organizational culture. While the change team was moving toward changing some of the social rules and culture in the organization, changing culture was slow and perhaps more of their work was at the level of consciousness.

In terms of ongoing work, the change team planned to continue efforts to build a second layer of leadership that understood SACCAWU policies and had the ability to interrogate and influence decisions. These leaders would be role models, ensuring that policies are in place at workplaces. The capacity of these leaders would be developed so that they could ensure the implementation of policies on sexual harassment, domestic violence and childcare and challenge the patriarchy hidden within union culture.

### **Reflections at the March 2009 Workshop: How change happens and the challenge of not recreating negatives when we get into fight mode**

The March 2009 Workshop with all four organizations<sup>50</sup> helped surface insights that challenged change team members' assumptions. One such conversation focused on the challenges of fighting for gender equality without recreating negative situations and even becoming perpetrators. The concern was that if we are in continual fight mode, we could end up unwittingly reproducing injustices. The discussion went on to consider how change happens and the links between working with individuals and organizing collectives.

---

<sup>49</sup> In relation to the Gender at Work framework.

<sup>50</sup> SACCAWU, WFP, TAC and JAW.

Reflecting on how the change teams could work in ways that did not recreate the negative situations they faced, Fatima Shabodien from WFP suggested the need for the group to reflect on its thinking about how society changes. “It’s useful to look back in history at changes in relation to what was once considered normal and at what needed to happen for things to change. For me, it is about understanding the dialectic between individual consciousness and changing society collectively. It is about how to mobilize women individually and contribute to organizing women. Until collectives of women start emerging, we are not going to defeat this thing (unequal relations of class, race and gender).”<sup>51</sup>

This statement raised the question of whether one should start with the individual or with the collective to effect change. Jenny Bell from JAW said she was struggling with the question of individual versus collective work: “I am not saying it’s either/or, but I am struggling with, ‘How does one balance it to create change ... Do you just focus on the individual or do you start with the collective and move to the individual? If by focusing on the individual, at the end of the day, you help individual women to reach a point of autonomy. What’s so bad about that?’ That’s activism, not at a structural level but an interpersonal level, which grows people’s ability to share and enable. It is a lot slower, but it can get you out of perpetuating the same patterns.”<sup>52</sup>

Drawing on JAW’s experience, Jenny noted the huge push in the organization to rescue people who were victims of domestic violence and to get into fight mode to take up the battle. As a result, “We became our own perpetrators.” Jenny suggested that working with individuals might be slower, but would perhaps go a longer way in ensuring that negative patterns were not recreated.

SACCAWU’s Patricia Appolis said that for change to happen, getting into fight mode was a necessity. She asserted that it is the collective that brings about change, that focusing on the individual could weaken building the collective. “Men in our union are saying that women are on the war path because women are asserting themselves. Yes, it is a war out there. If we want change, we have to be assertive and at times we may need to declare open war. Yesterday, while going through the previous workshop’s notes, I noted that the ‘I’ and the ‘collective’ came up consistently. We need to understand which is important—the ‘I,’ the individual, or the ‘collective.’ Is it the ‘collective’ that brings about change or is it the ‘I’? We need to balance between the two. I realize that in some women’s organizations the ‘I’ has become so important that the ‘collective’ is forgotten.”<sup>53</sup>

These reflections enabled change team members to critically review their actions, achievements and challenges, and assisted their ongoing planning.

### **October 2009 SACCAWU Change Team reflection and assessment of change projects**

In October 2009, the SACCAWU Change Team reflected on what it had achieved and what had been learned through the change project.<sup>54</sup> These achievements included setting up mall committees in ways that ensured women were involved and their concerns given voice and attention. This was a marked difference from male-dominated union committees, where gender equality work is sidelined as the

---

<sup>51</sup> Fatima Shabodien, Peer Learning Workshop 2, March 2009.

<sup>52</sup> Jenny Bell, Peer Learning Workshop 2, March 2009.

<sup>53</sup> Patricia Appolis, Peer Learning Workshop 2, March 2009.

<sup>54</sup> SACCAWU Change Team members participating in this workshop were Nomsa Ndlovu; Patricia Appolis; Thembi Motlhalane. Participating organizations were WFP, JAW and TAC.

terrain of the gender structures and not of the union itself. The team reflected on the value of the depth of reflection enabled by the process and on their learning from other organizations in the process and from the Gender at Work facilitators. Some of these insights included learning how change happens and recognizing the need to shift the consciousness of women and men in the union. Change team members noted that the effect of their success at the mall level had led to greater commitment within the union to implement gender equality resolutions. They also noted change team members were eager to see change that enabled their achievements.

### **Challenges encountered**

The change team also noted challenges they had encountered. Change team members did not have as much time as they had hoped for the change project. They had to respond to ongoing union demands resulting from an unprecedented number of strikes, the SACCAWU organizational renewal process and the COSATU Congress. They had to travel long distances because the malls they were organizing were located far from their homes and workplaces. Because workers at the malls have staggered lunch and tea breaks, it was not possible to have meetings with all the workers at once, and at times, change team members had to stay all day at the mall. In addition, the change project was a responsibility over and above the paid jobs of change team worker members.

They also experienced challenges in organizing women workers in the malls—challenges in getting them to join the union and to take an active part in leadership positions, particularly given their fears of losing their jobs if they joined a union.

### **Changes in the quality of worker's lives, in the organization and among change team members**

Change team members noted that significant changes had resulted from the change project among workers, in the organization and for change team members themselves. These changes included the increased confidence of a core group of young women workers and changes in workers' attitudes to gender equality. At the organizational level, the change project helped the change team implement mainstream programs and develop a second layer of leadership more sensitive to gender equality. It helped build the union at grassroots, at the mall level.

SACCAWU gender activists have faced ongoing challenges with men in the union. Based on their experiences, change team members think the answer is to “empower women so that they can stand up against men.”<sup>55</sup> Additionally, they believe it is important to use the structural power of women elected into union leadership positions. Change team members noted that they had experienced greater confidence and strength to go forward even in the face of harassment from male comrades.

### **Deepening insight and enabling creative strategies**

SACCAWU Change Team members noted they had learned from interacting with the other change teams engaged in the Gender at Work process. The process enabled deep reflection and deepened insights into how change happens, all of which had an impact on their ongoing discussions. In the words of a change team member: “The workshops brought home just how complex change is. There were changes in the way we debate and in our discussion.”<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>55</sup> Change team member, Peer Learning Workshop, 3 October 2009.

<sup>56</sup> Change team member, Peer Learning Workshop, 3 October 2009.

### **Shifting individual consciousness**

The change team saw the need to shift the individual consciousness of women and men and to build workers' confidence to create collective strength within the malls. They found that involving men was necessary, but difficult.

### **Changing formal and informal rules and norms to involve more women in the union**

The change team realized the need to change both the formal and informal rules and norms within the organization. Formal rules kept workers out of committees, because only elected members could attend committee meetings. Since mall committees were not formalized structures, the change team used this leeway to create new rules to involve greater numbers of women in processes intended to build their leadership capacities. "... We will have to deal with the informal rules and norms that exclude women. It's a double exclusion of grassroots women because of the formal rules in the organization that say that only women who are shop stewards can attend those structures. What we were trying to do is to build that second layer of leadership by targeting women members who are not shop stewards. What we were doing is trying to include these women in informal activities that are not acknowledged by the union. The malls provided us with an opportunity because of its location— it was not a formalized union structure."<sup>57</sup> This enabled more women to join the union and encouraged them to run for shop steward elections.

### **Reflections three years later: Gender at Work facilitator**

Nina Benjamin, interviewed on December 3, 2012, said the SACCAWU Change Team's main benefit from the Gender at Work process was that this had opened them to a way of viewing gender issues differently. SACCAWU was at the time trying to think of alternative ways to connect with its membership. Taking part in the process with the change teams from the other three organizations gave the SACCAWU Change Team additional options. "The change team was exposed to new ideas, they tried new things and they grew individually," Nina said.<sup>58</sup> They were aware of the need to work from below, involving store workers in ongoing activities, and they analyzed what this means, given that most workers were in short-term employment with limited job security. The change team tried to make a structural change at the grassroots level, and mall committees emerged as a significant part of this process.

In Nina's view, the Gender at Work process contributed a more nuanced idea of what to do around gender. It has built an understanding that the key issues are not only about leadership—there is a connection between the personal and the political and there is a need to bring in the whole person. A difficulty and an ongoing challenge is how to shift the union's culture and deep structure.

Union education methodologies tended to be transmitted through lectures. The Gender at Work process opened up a different form of engagement and facilitators had to be equipped to work in more participatory ways.

Mall committees provided a space where new approaches could be tried out, and this included making connections between workers as well as making connections between the mall committee and the community, and extending their actions beyond traditional union organizing.

---

<sup>57</sup> Change team member, Peer Learning Workshop 3, October 2009.

<sup>58</sup> Nina Benjamin, Interview, December 3, 2012.

Mall committee activities had enabled a common identity among SACCAWU members across companies and stores. Traditionally, the sense of being active union members tended to exclude ordinary union members. Mall committee activities were changing this. For example, young women workers who previously felt excluded from union processes and saw the union as the terrain of older, more experienced workers, now experienced the mall committees as a non-threatening space for cross-company discussion around issues—and this helped to forge a broader SACCAWU identity.

The change team focused on malls in black working-class communities, where the mall customers as well as the mall workers formed part of the same community. The change team drew on community support and involvement and engaged in community outreach as part of its plans to build worker solidarity. Team members engaged and educated customers in the malls on issues such as HIV/AIDS and visited institutions for orphans and abandoned children in the community as part of their community outreach activities. They thus extended their actions beyond traditional union organizing.

### **Reflections three years later: SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator**

Patricia Appolis, SACCAWU National Gender Coordinator, was interviewed in December 2012. She said the first phase of the Gender at Work process (2005-2007) was useful because it helped the change team explore what it could do around mall committees. “We chose one mall to see how to use this process to integrate gender equality work in one mall committee. Mall committees threw up new comrades—new people who became active in the union.”<sup>59</sup>

Sustaining work in the malls, however, was not easy. In addition to resource constraints, change teams faced difficulties because shop stewards were not re-elected, or were transferred to other areas. Some shifts in individual consciousness were achieved but shifting the male-dominated culture of the union was a far more difficult challenge.

As Patricia Appolis noted: “Gender at Work helped us to think through more clearly how to integrate gender equality work into mall committees to consolidate gender activists. This contributed to consolidating mall committees and gave us some pointers on how to integrate gender equality into the organizational review process.”<sup>60</sup>

---

<sup>59</sup> Patricia Appolis, Interview, December 3, 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Patricia Appolis, Interview, December 3, 2012.

## Chapter 3

# Sikhula Sonke: Challenging Deep-rooted and Pervasive Exploitation and Internalized Oppression

### 3.1. Introduction

This case study describes the Gender at Work organizational change process with a relatively new trade union, Sikhula Sonke.<sup>61</sup> Registered as a trade union in December 2004, Sikhula Sonke is women-led, autonomous and unaffiliated with any federation. It organizes women and men who live and work on fruit and wine farms in South Africa's Western Cape Province.<sup>62</sup> It engaged in organizational change processes with Gender at Work facilitation between 2008 and 2011.

Sikhula Sonke is fighting for agricultural worker rights in the Western Cape Province, which has the largest concentration of farmworkers in South Africa. Along with domestic workers, farmworkers earn some of the lowest minimum wages in South Africa. The sector is not only marked by inadequate wages, but also by appalling living and working conditions. Farmworkers often depend upon farm owners for multiple benefits—not just their jobs, but also their homes, their transportation and sometimes even their children's education. Losing a farm job can thus be devastating.

South Africa's agricultural workforce is characterized by a distinct gender division of labor: Farming is still perceived as predominantly "men's work" with women's labor considered supplementary. The permanent agricultural workforce is predominantly male, with women forming the largest percentage of casual and seasonal labor. "Most of the important jobs are reserved for men ... men are supervisors, spraying the chemicals, etc., which means they get (paid) more. Women are categorized as general workers."<sup>63</sup>

Women are generally paid less than men and because they are more likely to be seasonal workers, they suffer greater insecurity. Their contracts and residential rights are often in the men's names. Although illegal now, farmworkers live with the dire consequences of the legacy of the "dop system"—in which a part of workers' wages are paid in wine. As a result, levels of alcohol abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome and domestic violence are high.

The agricultural sector is also notoriously difficult to organize. According to a recent Human Rights Watch Report on conditions in South Africa's fruit and wine Industries: "Farmworkers are some of the most poorly organized workers in the country; estimates of the percentage of workers represented by trade unions range between 3 and 11 percent, compared to 30 percent in the formal sector as a whole

---

<sup>61</sup> Information from this section draws from Saliem Patel, "A Farm Worker's Wage: R150 is Not Enough but It Is a Good Place to Start!" *Labour Research Service*, November 2012; Kaitlin Cordes, "Ripe with Abuse: Human Rights Conditions in South Africa's Fruit and Wine Industries," Human Rights Watch Report, 2012; Celeste Fortuin, "Women Farm Workers Growing and Reaping Hope," 2009, [http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article\\_impr&id\\_article=25872](http://www.europe-solidaire.org/spip.php?page=article_impr&id_article=25872) (accessed August 28, 2013). Thanks to Celeste for the reference.

<sup>62</sup> Writing this case study has particular poignancy, given the province-wide farmworker strike at the time of writing. The strike demand was a call for a sectoral determination of R150 per day minimum wage in place of the current R69 per day minimum wage. The negotiation team taking up the demands of the striking workers included only one woman, Sara Claasen, president of Sikhula Sonke, a participant in the Gender at Work process.

<sup>63</sup> Dawid Afrika, Sikhula Sonke Treasurer, Hearing the Stories Meeting, September 2008.

and over 75 percent for mineworkers. Denial of freedom of association and resulting low levels of union representation can prevent workers from negotiating better working and living conditions or remedying exploitative situations.” The report explains how union organizers struggle to establish contact with workers in an environment free from intimidation. Many farmers deny access to and/or threaten union organizers and often intimidate workers who become union members. The agriculture sector is undergoing change: Casualization of labor is growing and, with the current strike, farmers threaten increased mechanization, which could result in many farm workers losing their jobs.

### 3.2 The Formation of Sikhula Sonke

As a women-led social movement trade union<sup>64</sup> Sikhula Sonke seeks to address both social and labor concerns of people living and working on fruit and wine farms in South Africa’s Western Cape Province. It is the first women-led agricultural trade union in the country, and a concrete example of women’s ability to lead and organize on their own behalf in a context where the union movement is predominantly male-led and male defined even though a large percentage of union members are women. The name “Sikhula Sonke” means, “You grow together as a tree with a trunk and then all the branches show different things.”

The NGO Women on Farms Project (WFP), sowed the seeds for Sikhula Sonke’s formation. In the early 1990s, WFP began building farmwomen’s activism and organization as a strategy to create opportunities for farmwomen to come together, share experiences and collectively initiate joint campaigns. Influenced by feminist ideas, WFP worked with farmworkers and farm dwellers from the early 1990s to the early 2000s and paid special attention to the situation of women. Over the years, WFP supported creation of several organization on the farms, including the Vroue Regte Group (the Woman’s Rights Group) and various farm committees.

By 2003, farmworkers realized that to be legally empowered to engage in worker rights issues, such as entering into collective bargaining agreements with farmers, they must formally register as a trade union. According to South African legislation, they were not allowed to register a woman-only trade union, so they included men as members and formally registered in December 2004. It took some years, however, before the union was financially independent of WFP.<sup>65</sup>

Influenced by its roots in the feminist Women on Farms Project, Sikhula Sonke from the beginning saw itself as an organization committed to the livelihood challenges farmwomen face, with a focus on the whole person. Issues the union addresses include a living wage; ethical trade; collective bargaining (including maternity leave and child care); conditions in the fields (e.g. access to toilets and protection from pesticides); and safe transportation to and from work. Social rights issues include reproductive health; gender-based violence; land and housing (such as ensuring housing contracts are signed by wives as well as husbands); evictions; accessing social insurance; alcoholism and low literacy.

Sikhula Sonke is also committed to democratic principles. These include: being member controlled; the empowerment of all; the unity of agricultural workers and dwellers; community involvement; and collective leadership. The union has a policy that all staff must have had prior experience working on a farm.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> The union interprets this as dealing with all the livelihood challenges of members, and not just labor-related concerns.

<sup>65</sup> Sikhula Sonke had its first operational budget in 2007 and entered into its first independent contract with funders in 2008.

<sup>66</sup> More recently, this policy seems to have undergone some change as the union re-examines its goals and strategies.

Rare among trade unions, an intrinsic part of Sikhula Sonke's identity is challenging gender inequality. Sikhula Sonke challenges the "work-family/home" split and the traditional union practice of viewing women only in their roles as workers, while not taking into account their essential reproductive and social roles and how intertwined all their roles are. The union's general secretary and the president are expected to be women. The union seeks to employ women first and will employ a man only if it can't find an appropriate woman. In Sikhula Sonke Congresses, two of every three representatives must be women.

Men who wish to be Sikhula Sonke members must sign a vow (in their application form) committing to refrain from any violence against women or children. Guilt in this regard will lead to the termination of membership. In recruitment drives, the union targets seasonal workers, two-thirds of whom are women.

To inculcate these norms, the union sees the need for ongoing awareness-building of members, challenging them to examine negative gender norms. At the start of the Gender at Work process, change team members described how these principles translate into their unique caring culture, which keeps women's interests at the heart of the organization. For instance, Patricia Dyata, deputy general secretary at the time, said, "Sikhula Sonke members are caring people ... we all fight for each other ... everyone helps each other out."<sup>67</sup> Dawid Afrika, Sikhula Sonke treasurer at the time, explained how his attitudes as a man changed as a result of his participation in the union: "If it was not for these women in Sikhula Sonke, I would be half the man I am .... For me it was normal to see and be part of abuse. Through sharing life experiences, they made me realize that women are human beings."<sup>68</sup>

### **3.3 The Gender at Work/Sikhula Sonke Partnership**

In May 2008, Gender at Work's South Africa Program Manager Michel Friedman approached Wendy Pekeur, general secretary of Sikhula Sonke, to explore the union's interest in participating in a Gender Action Learning Process.<sup>69</sup>

Gender at Work was interested in working with Sikhula Sonke because of the union's emphasis on addressing social justice issues among women from an extremely marginalized sector of the economy. Gender at Work sought to learn what it would mean to support a women worker-led organization such as Sikhula Sonke address unequal power relationships around gender, race, class and "management."

Gender at Work had previous contact with Sikhula Sonke through engagement with Women on Farms Project.<sup>70</sup> In early 2005, soon after Sikhula Sonke registered as an independent organization, Gender at Work engaged WFP in a Gender Action Learning Process. During this period, Sikhula Sonke's relationship with WFP was undergoing a fundamental shift, from a WFP beneficiary/client to partner. These changes led to some conflict and tension, in part around class and power differences between WFP and Sikhula Sonke. These tensions were addressed as part of WFP's action learning process.

As a result of their previous relationship, Gender at Work believed Sikhula Sonke would benefit from participation in a peer learning process, and that linking Sikhula Sonke with other membership-based

---

<sup>67</sup> Patricia Dyata, Hearing the Stories Meeting, September 2008.

<sup>68</sup> Dawid Afrika, Hearing the Stories Meeting, September 2008.

<sup>69</sup> In its early years, Gender at Work facilitator Michel Friedman was a WFP board member and had a relationship of trust both with WFP and with Sikhula Sonke.

<sup>70</sup> As noted in section two of this case study, Sikhula Sonke developed as a project of WFP.

organizations could deepen its capacity for self-management and strengthen its capacity to engage with WFP as an equal partner. This in turn could help challenge a widely held stereotype that sees farmworkers, particularly women farmworkers, as incapable of doing anything for themselves. The process also would help build the confidence and a sense of agency among farmworkers who have historically been denigrated and discriminated against by farm owners, a dynamic so pervasive that it has steeped into the every day interactions and power relationships workers must contend with.

### **Why was Sikhula Sonke interested in the Gender Action Learning Process?**

Compared with many other unions, Sikhula Sonke had made considerable strides in its work toward gender equality. Sikhula Sonke intended to be an inclusive organization, and opened its membership to anyone connected with farm life: workers, the unemployed, contract and seasonal workers and pensioners. By 2008, it was grappling with how to engage with workers from different backgrounds, ethnic/language groups and sexual orientations. Sikhula Sonke saw an opportunity in the Gender Action Learning Process to support its efforts to build the union in ways that advanced gender equality, build members' self-esteem and craft collective leadership across a diverse workforce. Sikhula Sonke sought to change its organizational culture of member dependency on the organizers, and build the capacities of union members to "make decisions and hold leadership accountable."<sup>71</sup>

## **3.4 The Work**

When Gender at Work began working with Sikhula Sonke in 2008, the four-year-old union represented 3,364 members, approximately 60 percent of whom were women. This was an opportune moment, because it was the year Sikhula Sonke gained financial independence from the NGO that had supported its formation.

The Gender at Work Action Learning process accompanied the Sikhula Sonke change team in two processes: one focusing on organizational change (the Gender Action Learning Process) and the other on writing as a tool for reflection, personal development and expression. Both comprised a series of workshops and ongoing mentorship geared to provide continual analytical, emotional and strategic support to an organizational change process.

The Gender Action Learning Process engaged four community-based organization (CBOs) and/or membership organizations in developing and implementing organizational change projects and facilitated learning across the four organizations. The three other organizations are Remmoho, the women's section of the Anti-Privatization Forum; Kganya Consortium, a collection of CBOs and income-generating projects working in Orange Farm, an informal settlement outside Johannesburg; and Vukani Tsohang Africa, a CBO working with intellectually challenged individuals and low-income women in an income generating/social development project. In joining the project, these organizations encountered farmworkers from the Western Cape for the first time. For the farmworkers, it was the first time they encountered groups that were attempting to create their own livelihoods.

The writing processes implemented during this period enabled participants in the four action learning processes to write about their experiences as women and change agents. Gender at Work uses writing processes as a way to undo the silence built up from years of exclusion. It helps authors key into their core power and access their authentic voices. By learning to name their experience and articulate and represent themselves, they become knowledge producers. Given that the authors are working class,

---

<sup>71</sup> Change team member, Hearing the Stories Meeting, September 2008.

and mostly women, this act in itself turns a key power dynamic of South African society on its head. This process challenges the pervasive belief that knowledge is produced exclusively by the middle class—or in a few instances by working class men. The facilitator's<sup>72</sup> main role in the Sikhula Sonke writing process involved supporting the change team to be more reflective so as to remember the “human being” and to keep making the connections between the Gender at Work process and their ongoing work as labor rights activists and leaders. The facilitator mediated tensions between staff (as workers) and elected officials (as management). While fighting many fires in a bureaucracy, it is easy to lose perspective amid the daily details of running a union.

As part of the Gender Action Learning Process, the Sikhula Sonke Change Team developed, planned and implemented a change project in which it could put into practice the ideas, plans and new insights it developed. The deputy general secretary,<sup>73</sup> the president<sup>74</sup> and a national executive committee member<sup>75</sup> participated throughout the three-year peer gender action learning and writing process. Other union members participated at different times.<sup>76</sup>

The following table gives a timeline of key events in the Gender Action Learning Process undertaken with Sikhula Sonke, as well as a description of the goals and objectives of each step in the process. Each step builds on the other, and reinforces the overall process.

---

<sup>72</sup> Interview with facilitator Nina Benjamin, December 2012.

<sup>73</sup> Patricia Dyata.

<sup>74</sup> Sara Claasen.

<sup>75</sup> Sana Louw.

<sup>76</sup> General Secretary Wendy Pekeur and Treasurer Dawid Afrika attended the orientation meeting, the “Hearing the Stories” meeting and the first peer learning meeting. National Executive Committee member Gertruida Koopman participated in the second and third peer meetings and National Executive Committee member Riana participated in the second peer meeting. Patricia Dyata became acting general secretary in March 2011 and was formally elected general secretary in September 2011. Patricia, Sara, Sana and Riana participated in the first writing process. Patricia and Sara participated in the second writing process. Other members of Sikhula Sonke engaged in the implementation of the change project.

Date	Key Event	Purpose
June 2008	<b>Orientation meeting</b> Sikhula Sonke; Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum; Gender at Work facilitators	Change teams from participating organizations meet and learn about each other (personally, and organizationally and about the communities they serve); about the Gender at Work methodology and how the action learning process might help.
September 2008	<b>Hearing the Stories</b> Sikhula Sonke Change Team; Gender at Work Facilitators	Change teams reflect on their organization's history, values, culture, key programs, key challenges and the issues they would focus on in the 18-month process.
October 2008	<b>First peer learning workshop</b> with Sikhula Sonke; Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum	Peer learning community is established where participants engage in personal reflection, team reflection, consideration of organizational dynamics, questions of power and broader social change. The Gender at Work Framework <sup>77</sup> is introduced and used by each change team to analyze where their organizations were effecting change and where they needed to place more effort. Based on their analyses, teams identify areas to improve and develop plans for their change projects.
November 2008– May 2009	Change Teams implement their change projects with support from the Gender at Work facilitators which includes two meetings with the Gender at Work facilitator in early March 2009 and late April 2009.	
May 2009	<b>Second Peer learning workshop</b> with Sikhula Sonke; Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum	Change teams reflect on work undertaken in the change projects, contribute to continued peer learning, share stories, concepts and insights and share insights about how change happens. Participants reflect on how they engage with the Gender at Work Framework and the assumptions about change that inform their strategies. They reflect on what they have learned, how it made them feel and revise their plans for the next period.
May 2009– Feb. 2010	Change Teams implement change projects–2 meetings, November 2009 and February 2010 with Gender at Work facilitator	
February 2010	<b>Third Peer learning workshop</b> with Sikhula Sonke; Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum	Change team members review their experience of the 18-month action learning process; draw lessons; develop an understanding of what is working; add to their theory of change; explore different forms of monitoring, evaluation and gathering feedback; and develop clear next steps for sharing experiences.

#### Writing Process

Date	Key Event	Purpose
March 2010	Writing workshop for stories of personal change: Sikhula Sonke with Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum; JAW; SACCAWU; TAC; Women on Farms	Participants supported to write a personal story of change. <sup>78</sup>
November 2010	Workshop with six Sikhula Sonke staff and Sara from the national executive committee to reflect on what should be included in the organizational story.	Key organizational members contribute toward conceptualizing their stories and the main message.
February 2011	First writing workshop, to support writing organizational change stories. <sup>79</sup> Participants from Sikhula Sonke; Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum; JAW	Two authors from each organization develop outlines for organization change stories and receive guidance in conducting writing assignments over the following months.
Sept. 2011	Second workshop on organizational change stories—Sikhula Sonke with Kganya Consortium; Vukani Tsohang Afrika; Remmoho Women's Forum; JAW	Final workshop to support authors completing their organizational change stories.

<sup>77</sup> Chapter 1 of this report gives a detailed explanation of the Gender at Work Framework.

<sup>78</sup> Patricia Dyata, "Throwing away the Beating Stick"; Claasen, Sara, "Teardrops of Perseverance"; Riana, "My HIV Status," in *Writing from the Inside, Stories of Hope and Change*, Shamim Meer, ed., 2010, [http://www.genderatwork.org/sites/genderatwork.org/files/resources/Stories\\_of\\_Hope.pdf](http://www.genderatwork.org/sites/genderatwork.org/files/resources/Stories_of_Hope.pdf) (accessed May 24, 2013).

<sup>79</sup> Claasen, "The Highest Trees Always Get the Most Wind," and Dyata, "Changing Seasons," in *Writing from the Inside: Stories of Hope and Change*, Shamim Meer, ed., Labour Research Service, 2012, <http://www.lrs.org.za/docs/Transforming%20Power%202012.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2013).

### 3.5 The Change Project: Planning, Implementing, Reflecting, Learning

This section sets out the key reflections of the Sikhula Sonke Change Team during the Gender Action Learning Process, its plans for its change project, its actions, what team members learned and how their reflections and insights shaped their subsequent actions.

Sikhula Sonke's change project enabled the change team to engage in Sikhula Sonke ongoing work, but with a different awareness because of the Gender at Work process. These new insights helped the change team to see, identify and grapple with the meaning of every day practices of power in relation to accountability issues, attitudes access to resources and sharing power and responsibilities.

Some of the challenges the union faced in its attempts to create a truly member controlled organization and establish more gender-equal norms can best be seen through its struggles in implementing its own rules. Examples that emerged in the process and which are illustrated below include addressing alcoholism, sustaining norms on ethical sexual conduct and managing tensions and role conflicts between staff and officials.

#### **The 2008-2010 Peer Learning Process: Organizational Self-reflection and Planning the Project**

The workshop process and ongoing mentoring enabled the change team to articulate and make apparent the strategies it was already using, and to think about how to entrench the principles enshrined in the union constitution—particularly how to sustain and cultivate new women leaders for meaningful participation.

**At the first Peer Learning Process in 2008**, the Sikhula Sonke Change Team explained how the union's six core programs (institution building; training and capacity building; case work, collective bargaining; campaigns) address both labor rights and social issues (see chart, below).

#### **Institution building**

Building farm committees, branch executive committees and a national executive committee.

- **Farm committees**, elected by workers on the farms, act as a crucial link between farmers and workers because they are trained to provide resources, emergency aid and other support. They support and represent workers in a context of patriarchal relations in which the farmer is the master.
- **Branch executive committees** responsible for strategic direction and recruitment at the branch level are elected from 10 farms, with one representative per farm.
- **National Executive Committee** leaders are elected during the congress (the highest decision-making body where policies are passed and strategic planning and direction is decided). As the governing structure, congress gets mandates from members.

#### **Training and capacity building**

To empower women and train men to challenge violations and take up disputes on farms, even in the absence of the union.

#### **Case work**

The servicing part of the union—dealing with dismissals, abuse of women, evictions, accessing social insurance grants and identity documents.

#### **Collective bargaining**

Negotiations with the farmers. Typically this involves one farm at a time.

<b>Campaigns</b>
Alcoholism, evictions, living wage, decent work, decent lives. <sup>80</sup>

The change team described some of the challenges within the union:

- Difficulties bringing workers together to constitute a collective, given their isolation on geographically-separated farms.
- The growing trend of farm labor becoming casualized as seasonal, contract labor, and the precarious nature of contract work.
- Workers' reluctance to join unions due to fear of persecution by farmers. The farming sector is one of the least organized with difficult social conditions and numerous trade unions compete with each other.
- The challenging relationships and gaps between Sikhula Sonke's leadership, staff and members.
- Pervasive gender and racial divisions on the farms. The union faced the challenge of ensuring that women's voices were not silenced in the presence of men, and that Xhosa workers were not isolated because of racial and language differences in a context in which colored<sup>81</sup> workers were in the majority.
- Economic policies of the government hostile to workers, farmers who did not comply with laws and a government that did not enforce laws.

### **Exploring Sikhula Sonke's thinking on change and women's leadership through the Gender at Work Framework**

During the first peer learning process, change team members explored their thinking behind their strategy of ensuring women in leadership positions. This discussion, which took place through the lens of the Gender at Work Framework, enabled the team to examine what is involved in changing an organization's internal culture and creating a new norm. The discussion made more visible the process the union followed, and made more conscious the assumptions underlying the union's actions to ensure women in leadership positions. Making clear Sikhula Sonke's thinking on change assisted the change team to develop strategies. It also helped them to see what is required to make a new concept (such as women as leaders) become part of the norm so that everyone takes it for granted.

---

<sup>80</sup> Campaigns the union was engaged in included:

- Addressing the high rates of alcoholism on the farms and the high incidence of fetal alcohol poison syndrome, both legacies of the dop system.
- An anti-eviction campaign in response to large-scale farm evictions in which women and children made up 77 percent of those evicted.
- The TESCO campaign to alert consumers that British company, TESCO, sources products from Western Cape farms with exploitative working conditions and to pressure these farms to change their practices.
- The living wage campaign, which involved lobbying the minister of labor to set a living minimum wage for farmworkers.
- The "Decent Work, Decent Lives" campaign for the provision of toilets in the orchards and fields, provision of protective clothing when working with pesticides, safe transportation, paid maternity leave, child care and housing contracts in women's names.

<sup>81</sup> In South Africa, Zambia, Namibia and Zimbabwe, the term 'colored' refers both to a specific ethnic group of complex mixed origins, which is considered neither black nor white, and in other contexts, to people of mixed races; in neither context is its usage considered derogatory.

<b>Women’s and men’s consciousness</b>	<b>Women’s condition and access to resources</b>
<p>Raise consciousness among both women and men that women can be leaders.</p> <p>Use empowerment education and strategies to help women feel skilled and empowered to lead.</p>	<p>Women get access to leadership and a voice.</p>
<b>Informal rules—culture—what excludes, what we take for granted (habits)</b>	<b>Formal policies and laws, rules of the game</b>
<p>Women in leadership at all levels of the union enables us to challenge the traditional norm that women can’t be leaders.</p> <p>We require men to support women in their leadership positions.</p>	<p>The union constitution includes promoting women’s leadership as a core principle.</p>

In reflecting on how the union works (captured in the above graphic), Sikhula Sonke noted that it started with consciousness. Its assumption was that you first must believe it is possible for a woman to be a leader. You need the awareness and consciousness that women can be leaders. Women also need skills to be good leaders and women need access to leadership positions. This access changes the norm, because if space conducive to women’s leadership is not created, women would drop out. Through training and education, both women and men can change the way they think about traditional cultural norms of exclusion. Sikhula Sonke’s strategy therefore combines actively seeking access to positions for women with training and empowerment processes to enable women to be effective leaders—all of which are supported by promoting women’s leadership as a core organizational principle in Sikhula Sonke’s constitution. The union as a matter of course encourages women’s leadership, and women are typically elected chairpersons, vice chairpersons and secretaries. Women have consistently made up at least 75 percent of leadership, and from the beginning, women have always held the offices of president and deputy president.

Sikhula Sonke’s theory of change puts consciousness first and assumes that with consciousness, leadership positions will be used more carefully. There is also the realization of the need to work at a range of interrelated levels. Sikhula Sonke recognizes that for a new norm to become automatic, continuous education, training, skills building and consciousness-raising are required. Cultural change enabling women to take on leadership roles will not take place unless these actions are supported at all levels, including support from partners and families in women’s households.

**Sikhula Sonke’s self-identified challenges**

At the time Sikhula Sonke took part in the project, the union had nine branch executive committees, with 10 members each. The union realized that some of the dependency of branch executive committee members on organizers was structural and that access to specific resources would reduce dependency. They realized that the committee members needed cellphones and satellite offices where they could use computers. They recognized they could investigate using other resources like libraries and advice offices so that the branch members could use existing infrastructure. By utilizing the Gender

at Work framework in an organizational self-analysis, the Sikhula Sonke Change Team recognized that ensuring accountability and enabling branch committee members to function effectively meant the union needed to build its capabilities so it would be less reliant on union organizers and better able to take on less complicated grievances.

The change team also became conscious that there is a structural tension between the majority women member-led executive body (the national executive committee) and staff. The relationship was made more complex by overlapping relationships. Some of the staff were also founders of Sikhula Sonke and had close personal relationships with national executive committee members. The general secretary at the time (also a change team member) explained that because of the closeness between the national executive committee and staff, the committee struggled to implement Sikhula Sonke disciplinary codes. Distinguishing between personal relationships and organizational roles was a big challenge.

Giving due recognition to structural authority was also more difficult in a context in which top leadership were farm workers with little formal education and no prior experience in running an organization. National Executive Committee President Sara Claasen noted that she felt the staff and organizers did not value her role as a member of the executive committee, that they “often think that they are better than us. They see the (national executive committee) as just farm women and the farmworker.”<sup>82</sup>

Through the Gender at Work Action Learning Process, numerous key issues surfaced. As one change team member observed: “... a lot of hidden things came out which we had never spoken about before. For example, organizers are in control of the (branch executive committee) BEC, and that is not what we want. Now we can see where our organization is at, and we can see where some of the gaps are.” A second change team member felt the process had helped her “to find out what caused the blockage in our work.”<sup>83</sup>

### **Planning the change project**

In introducing the plan for its change project, Sikhula Sonke Change Team members acknowledged that they are farm people “who have never governed such an organization before.” They thus chose to strengthen the capacity of the branch executive committee members with the aim of deepening democracy within the organization to ensure it is member-driven and abides by the union’s principle of being “member controlled.” They felt strongly that if they did not “keep the people (members) with us, we will lose our focus and our power.”<sup>84</sup>

The challenge of addressing worker dependency on organizers gets to the heart of centuries of farmworkers being treated like slaves and the associated dependency built into the institutional norm of the “master-slave” relationship, so entrenched in South Africa’s agricultural sector. The norm of dependency was strong not only between farmworkers and farm owners, but also between women and men living on the farms. By focusing on addressing member’s dependency on organizers, the union was determined not to repeat this historical pattern in its own organizational culture.

The change team set an 18-month goal (up to February 2010) to inform and raise the consciousness of branch executive committee members and hold the Sikhula Sonke National Executive Committee accountable.

---

<sup>82</sup> Sara Claasen, First Peer Learning Workshop, October 2008.

<sup>83</sup> Wendy Pekeur, First Peer learning workshop, October 2008.

<sup>84</sup> Change team members, First Peer Learning Workshop, October 2008.

The Change Team decided its activities would include:

- Developing a training program.
- Developing a monitoring and evaluation plan.
- Developing an audio CD.
- Developing a skills audit.

The change team's five-year (up to October 2013) vision involved enhancing the effectiveness and efficiency of members, farm committees and the branch executive committee to deepen the democratic process and improve strategizing and decision-making among members and ensure Sikhula Sonke remained a member-driven organization. The change team planned to use various labor support organizations to assist with its training and education program. Further, the team sought to use publications and phone contact as communication tools and public transportation as part of organizing. The team planned to develop a popular education training system to address all skill levels; conduct a skills audit to see what members needed to learn; and increase knowledge through a quiz at monthly branch executive committee meetings. The change team explained that this plan would be linked with and guided by its existing strategic plan. The team's new reflections would influence **how** it would go about its activities more than **what** it would do.

#### **Reflections at the Second Peer Learning Workshop on progress with deepening democracy**

By the second peer learning workshop, the Sikhula Sonke Change Team explained how the union had continued with much of its ongoing work—but with a different awareness.

The change team had begun to grapple with the meaning of every day practices of power in relation to accountability issues, attitudes, access to resources and sharing of power and responsibilities. Change team members explained that a key strategy they developed to improve internal accountability mechanisms was dual reporting. In addition to the branch executive committee reporting “upward” to the national executive committee, the national executive now also reports to the branch executive committees.

Externally, the team had improved its relationship with Women on Farms Project and was now working with the group as with any organization. This interaction strengthened and empowered Sikhula Sonke leadership, and taught the leaders to own their roles in the conflict. In reflecting on the situation, one change team member said: “... both organizations were stubborn and Sikhula Sonke always had to defend ourselves, to prove that we could do it on our own. We are farmworkers with no degrees and no experience at university. WFP are people who earn a lot, and have degrees and qualifications. There was always that sour relationship—they were more powerful than us. Before we became independent, Women on Farms Project was the infrastructure, they held our finances. From the Sikhula Sonke circle, we defended ourselves. We decided to bring in conflict resolution. From that process, we learned how to respect each other and to communicate in a professional way with each other.”<sup>85</sup>

Organizers had to be told to stop doing things for members that members could do for themselves. “Some organizers always decided for people, just to find it wasn't what people wanted,” said one participant. A key lesson they had learned, she continued, is that “solidarity and unity are the most

---

<sup>85</sup> Change team member, Second Peer Learning Workshop, May 2009.

important ingredients to build a strong movement ... never lose focus on what we are actually fighting for.”<sup>86</sup>

Change team members began to recognize that some union practices stood in the way of attracting and involving members. They felt that changes were needed in how they facilitated meetings, in how they listened to each other and in how they provided access to resources. They noticed that a simple action, such as how you organize the room (seating participants in a circle for instance), can make a difference in how people participate. From watching the Gender at Work facilitator, they learned the value of creating more open space and of proactively supporting less engaged members.

### **Reflections at the Third Peer Learning Workshop**

By the third peer learning, Sikhula Sonke had facilitated access to a range of resources for branch executive committee members to improve their skills in writing, computer literacy and fundraising; to help them get their learner driver’s licenses; and to improve their knowledge of labor laws.

Before the third peer learning meeting, the change team held a workshop with all shop stewards (rather than exclusively with branch executive committee members), to create an open space for them to raise their concerns. In the words of one workshop participant: “On some farms, the formal structures are weak. So by bringing all the shop stewards together, the stronger comrades can assist the comrades who feel weaker.” Discussion during the peer learning workshops enabled reflection on some of the challenges the union faced in creating a truly member-controlled organization with more gender equal norms. In particular, change team members reflected on struggles to implement Sikhula Sonke rules on alcoholism, to sustain norms on ethical sexual conduct and on managing role conflicts and tensions between staff and officials.

### **The Challenge of addressing a long history of alcoholism on the farms**

The way in which Sikhula Sonke took up the issue of alcoholism highlights the growing strength of the branch executive committees, their relationship with the national executive committee and the complexity of supporting the creation of new norms. The previous year, the national executive committee decided not to support branch level events where alcohol was being sold for fundraising purposes. The branch executive committee was not happy with the national executive committee decision and wrote a letter to the national executive committee to explain its position. As a result, the issue had to be debated, and each side had to develop its argument.

At the third peer learning workshop, the change team had the opportunity to develop and clarify its position and to explore some of the complexities involved in addressing alcoholism on farms. According to a national executive committee member, “A lot of youth are attending these functions (discos) and using alcohol and we see the abuse that goes with it. The outcome is violent behavior, unacceptable sexual behavior, more domestic violence at home. This is all driven by the history of the dop system where parents earned small money and were paid with alcohol. Now, people are smuggling alcohol, tik and dagga<sup>87</sup> and there are big problems with fetal alcohol syndrome. We (the union) adopted a mandate from congress to close shebeens<sup>88</sup> on farms—and now some people have been dismissed for

---

<sup>86</sup> Change team member, Second Peer Learning Workshop, May 2009

<sup>87</sup> Tik is the local name given to crystal methamphetamine, one of the main drugs currently being abused in the Western Cape. Dagga is a local name for marijuana or cannabis.

<sup>88</sup> Initially, shebeens were most often located in black townships as an alternative to pubs and bars when, under apartheid, black Africans could not enter a pub or bar reserved for whites. During the apartheid era, shebeens became a crucial meeting

not wanting to accept this. If Sikhula Sonke continues selling alcohol then they will be perpetrators. In the past, there was a code of conduct, yet we allowed people to break rules and so we were part of the rule breakers. We need to develop a better understanding of the mandate that was set by Sikhula Sonke. We need to take them (the branch executive committee) back to the mandate adopted at congress and to remind them that it was not from the (national executive committee) but from Sikhula Sonke members.”<sup>89</sup>

A change team member noted that farmers asked Sikhula Sonke to help in cases in which workers were absent from the job because of alcoholism, so that workers would not be dismissed for a problem the farmers had created in the first place.

### **Challenges in sustaining norms that support ethical sexual conduct**

During the second peer learning workshop, the Sikhula Sonke team explained the challenge in sustaining a culture that supports nondiscrimination against women, including ethical sexual conduct between employees and members. The change team learned that to make this a norm-guiding behavior required more than disciplinary action. Team members also had to grapple with the different power relations and fallout among paid staff, the national executive committee and members over the case of an organizer disciplined for having sexual relations with members. As a change team member noted: “We had the first disciplinary hearing and our first action of dismissal. One of our organizers was dismissed, he was having sexual relations all over. Sikhula Sonke National Executive Committee knew about this but could not take a stand, because there was no grievance. It was very difficult and emotional for us. We had to take a stand. This guy took us to the CCMA<sup>90</sup> and we won the case. Some of the organizers were also very unhappy but since the CCMA case they have been quiet.”<sup>91</sup>

### **Negotiating power and managing tensions between staff and officials**

There has been ongoing tension between Sikhula Sonke’s paid staff and elected officials. This is not uncommon in South African trade unions and Sikhula Sonke is particularly conscious of the need to run the union more professionally. Everyone is encouraged to learn to take responsibility for his or her own part in conflict. At the second peer learning workshop, a national executive committee member on the change team noted that the Gender at Work process “... also helps us as the national executive committee to look deep in our hearts and question the way we are treating staff. Some of us admitted that we were wrong, and part of the environment in the office changed.”<sup>92</sup>

Gender at Work Facilitator Nina Benjamin was asked to facilitate a meeting between the organizers and the union’s elected officials. She explained how the organizers were being challenged by the branch executive committee members in the change process and that they felt victimized by the branch executive committee members. The branch executive committees were encouraged to challenge the organizers when necessary as part of challenging the existing power dynamic and dependency of workers on organizers. The Deputy General Secretary said: “I have been beaten from both sides from

---

place for activists. They are now a legal part of the South African landscape and serve commercial beers as well as umqombothi, a traditional African beer made from maize and sorghum.

<sup>89</sup> Change team member (also a national executive committee member), Second Peer Learning Workshop, May 2009.

<sup>90</sup> The Commission for Conciliation, Mediation and Arbitration (CCMA) is a dispute resolution body established by the South African Labor Relations Act, 66 of 1995 (LRA). It is an independent body, does not belong to and is not controlled by any political party, trade union or business. It provides a cooperative model based on collective bargaining, greater participation, organizational rights, effective conflict resolution and higher levels of co-operation.

<sup>91</sup> Change team member, Second Peer Learning Workshop, May 2009.

<sup>92</sup> Change team member, Second Peer Learning Workshop, May 2009.

the (national executive committee) and staff ... I am not there to choose sides. I am going with my heart and saying what is right and best. I will also motivate the (national executive committee) and staff to come together and take hands. It is important for us leaders to work together. It's not easy but we are getting there. The conflict resolution process (with WFP) helped a lot. People admitted that we are not so innocent. If we can accept and admit something, it's big."<sup>93</sup>

Part of reflecting on creating new norms included contemplating the meaning of leadership and defining what kind of a person can be a leader. In March 2009, at their first mentoring meeting with the facilitator, staff and change team, members reflected upon their values as a union and what makes them different from more traditional unions. They made conscious for themselves the actions they were taking to build branch level leadership.

#### **Sikhula Sonke strategies to build branch executive committee leadership (Facilitator notes, March 2009)**

##### **Farmworkers**

###### *Practice in chairing meetings and giving reports*

- We give other people a chance to chair meetings.
- Giving comrades a chance to give reports.
- Being able to accept and reflect on mistakes.

###### *Practice in speaking for one's self*

- Through continuous reinforcement, we are trying to get people to speak for themselves.

##### **Organizers**

- Organizers are playing more of an advisory role.
- Typing up notes in preparation for meetings.
- Organizers need to be conscious of not appearing as if they have favorites. Drawing up the agenda for meetings jointly with the branch executive committee members or allowing the branch executive committee members to draw up the agenda themselves.
- Training that will assist branch executive committee members to understand their roles and get a sense of ownership of their roles.
- Being able to accept and reflect on mistakes.

##### **Value affirmation and develop practices of inclusion**

- Building trust, love and respect.
- Appreciating how people learn from experience.
- Recognizing that confidence can grow with an increase in knowledge.
- Understanding how as new leaders people want a sense of security.
- Recognizing the role of model leaders.
- Making sure that the whole group in the branch executive committee understands the issues and the problems.
- Ensuring freedom to use the language of their choice on the basis that translation would be provided when needed
- Developing our understanding of collective leadership.

Based on their existing strengths and challenges, change team members then asked themselves how they wanted to take forward the process of building leadership and what kind of leadership they wanted to build. They asked: How can we ensure that the women and men in leadership feel confident and respected and do not use their power to dominate others? How do we get other people to feel that

---

<sup>93</sup> Change team member, Deputy General Secretary, Second Peer Learning Workshop, May 2009.

they can become leaders? They saw the need to consciously bring to the leadership-building process values such as love, sense of family, respect and equality.<sup>94</sup>

### 3.6 Key Changes and How the Action Learning Process Helped

This section describes changes resulting from the union's actions at personal, union and farm levels.

The individual change stories<sup>95</sup> demonstrate the central role personal change plays in the development of strong women worker leaders and the impact of this role modeling on other members. Changes in farmworkers' lives overlap significantly with changes in the union, particularly the strengthening of the branch-level committees and executives. Farmworkers' daily lives were improving and they were gaining access to new resources. They were challenging inhumane conditions and demanding to be treated with dignity. Farm-level activism was increasing, branch executive committees were strengthening and a greater number of social issues were being addressed. Union cultural practices were also changing, with more branch members becoming visible in campaigns in public media. Branches were less dependent upon organizers and the union was expanding into new areas. These changes were catalyzed by the Gender Action Learning Process as well as by other interventions and events.<sup>96</sup>

#### Personal Changes

The Sikhula Sonke change team members illustrated how **personal change is fundamentally necessary for farmworker women to become powerful union leaders.**

A change team member shared how **personal change improved her capacity as an elected official.** She highlighted the significance of "role modeling"—when other workers saw changes in people like themselves they become stronger and inspired to stand up for themselves. She learned that if you do things with love, people understand and get motivated to participate in organizational activities. She said:

"There are a lot of people in the farms who are afraid to know their rights and to join unions. Before the (Gender at Work) process I was very concerned about what people would say if I spoke, but now I am not so worried. If I can speak to farmers and change things, then I don't need to worry. I am not afraid of anyone—farmer, man, policeman, president. I started from shop floor to (national executive committee) level. After participating in the Gender at Work process and doing the "looking into each other's eyes exercise," I can now look at the farmers' eyes without being intimidated. I am also able to listen to my fellow workers more. I am now confident and speak English with ease, without feeling inferior. I am able to stand up and give feedback of the workshop, write reports with ease. Personally, I plan my time more. I make time for my family and take time for myself and go to the choir."<sup>97</sup>

Another change team member explained how much **more confident** she has become and how this **strengthened her in her role** of helping workers.

---

<sup>94</sup> Facilitator minutes, March 2009.

<sup>95</sup> The stories come from the third peer learning report (February 2010), a meeting between the facilitator and the staff nine months after the third peer meeting (November 2010); Claasen, "The Highest Trees Always Get the Most Wind," and Dyata, "Changing Seasons," in *Writing from the Inside: Stories of Hope and Change*, Shamim Meer, ed., Labour Research Service, 2012, <http://www.lrs.org.za/docs/Transforming%20Power%202012.pdf> (accessed May 24, 2013).

<sup>96</sup> The changes reported here were catalysed during the 18-month action learning process and were also influenced by other simultaneous interventions. Organizations and people are complex and have constantly changing realities—this reflection is a bit like taking a snapshot at a particular moment in time.

<sup>97</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

“This is how I have grown in my union. The flower that is closed is how shy I was. I never spoke and always thought that everything I am about to say is wrong and that people will laugh at me. But after I came to this Gender at Work workshop and I got more information, I began to grow and to get more confidence and this flower opened. This is how my life with people changed. I have learned to stand up for my rights and to practice my rights. I tell my children, ‘I am leaving my footprint for you. I leave my home and I do not feel guilty.’”<sup>98</sup>

Sara Claasen,<sup>99</sup> the union president, shared how she **grew stronger and more confident**, how her **relationship to power changed** and how this in turn impacted on how she felt she needed to lead. She was better able to receive criticism and be vulnerable.

“When I first came for the Gender at Work workshop, I was so scared and quiet but despite all my fear, I was curious and excited. As time went, I grew, and I got some ‘fertilizer’ in the form of the challenges and exercises at Gender at Work. Every time when I got fed, I grew stronger. With all the support, I got more and more side-wings (Takke) and with that I went back and implemented it in my organization, and also applied it in my own personal life. What has changed? Power. There are lots of different levels in my organization. Different people have different jobs. (As president), I don’t have to control the whole organization. Ordinary members are important and have a role to play. Through Gender at Work, I have learned how to do things differently in my own organization—how to bring changes in structures. I have also become more empowered on how to take criticism. I learned that you need to be able to handle negative people and this will help you grow.”

Change team members talked about **how important it was for leaders to practice what they preach**. In overcoming many odds—such as alcoholism and domestic violence—they became important role models, showing other farmwomen it is possible to change. One change team member described how giving up alcohol was one of the most significant changes in her own life, and how this has also significantly affected her role in the union. The role of the peer learning process and the Gender at Work facilitators are central to her story.

“When I first came in contact with the Gender at Work change project, I was one frustrated, confused, angry and depressed woman. In my role as deputy secretary general, I noticed that things were not done as they were supposed to be done by the leaders. Because I wasn’t able to speak out, I became very stressed out and that led me to drinking, and that’s when I had the courage to face them. But this led to a disciplinary dispute. During that time, I spoke to one of the Gender at Work facilitators really deeply on how I felt, I also shared similar stories at Gender at Work peer sessions because this was the only space where I could openly speak about it in confidence because I knew people would understand me and give me fruitful advice. I would then go back and try it out and (I realized that) it worked. One day one of the facilitators and I were talking about my drinking and that is when I acknowledged that I have a problem because it affected my personal life, my children, my mother. With the support of the Gender at Work facilitator, I have joined the Alcoholics Anonymous and there I learned the same things I have received at Gender at Work, but it was a deeper process. I have been sober for seven months now, my family is happy, my son’s grades have improved and my mother is a happy, healthy woman. At Gender at Work, I have also learned how to confront and not feel guilty about it. Listening to different stories at Gender at Work peer sessions taught me a lot. You have to love yourself, respect yourself and then you will know how to share that with others.”<sup>100</sup>

---

<sup>98</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>99</sup> Claasen, “The Highest Trees Always Get the Most Wind” in *Transforming Power*,” 62-63.

<sup>100</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

In describing why her changed behavior and greater focus has been significant, this change team member suggested: “Although the change was primarily personal, it contributed to the organization and the community. What helped was acknowledging the problem and having the courage to want to change. I am now sober and enjoying life and I can confront it without getting drunk. The union benefits because I am more flexible and clear and can analyze.”<sup>101</sup>

Changes visible in farmworkers’ lives significantly overlapped with changes in the union, particularly the strengthening of the branch-level committees and executives. At various meetings<sup>102</sup> toward the end of 2009 and early 2010, the change team and other union members reflected upon what had changed in the union and in relationship to their objective of building a second tier of leaders. At the third peer learning meeting, a change team member said: “We can see that the second layer of leaders is visible. More and more, the members are driving the organization—more than the organizers and officials—and this was one of the main aims of our change project.”<sup>103</sup>

The following sections illustrate some of the core changes in farmworkers’ lives and in the union culture.

### **How have farmworkers’ lives changed?**

Farmworkers’ daily lives were improving and **they were gaining access to new resources**. These changes were largely a result of the increase in branch executive committee activity. In some instances, workers were successfully fighting for wage increases or getting their jobs back after being dismissed. At the farm level, in various districts, workers had won access to toilets in the vineyards and in some areas, electricity. On one farm, workers won the right for a stoep<sup>104</sup> for wheelchair access into the house.

Farmworkers have been assisted in their personal lives through branch level social support. For instance, one young girl received funding by a branch so she could attend a school farewell party in her final year; another person was helped with a wedding. When a farm leader’s husband got sick, the branch executive committee leaders organized transportation to go to the house and assist with the cleaning, washing, gardening and child care.

In addition to these changes, the relationship between farmers and workers was improving; membership was growing; domestic violence was decreasing and the union was tackling broader discrimination issues (such as xenophobia, homophobia and HIV). A change team member explained how farmworkers were challenging inhumane conditions:

“People on a farm near Stellenbosch were living in pig’s houses. These places were not right for people. We organized picketing. We encouraged the farmers to plant vegetables on uncultivated land. The farmer phoned the police and they came. There were buses full of people blocking the main road. People came from the Department of Labor and there were social workers. They told the farmer that it's not right.”<sup>105</sup>

When asked about the relationship between women and men on the farms, a change team member noted:

---

<sup>101</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>102</sup> An interview between the facilitator and the acting general secretary, November 2009; a preparatory meeting in February 2010; and the third peer learning meeting, February 2010.

<sup>103</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>104</sup> An Afrikaans word describing a kind of veranda attached to a house, usually with a roof.

<sup>105</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

“The workshops we ran have given people a lot of information and women are speaking to each other more—breaking the silence (about domestic violence). There is more willingness to take action—neighbors will phone police, women are refusing to take it anymore ... Men are becoming more supportive.” On being asked if norms are changing, she said: “We as women are forcing men to change. More and more men are accepting that women need to be what they want to be.”<sup>106</sup>

### **Farmworker activism at farm level**

A change team member emphasized how farmworkers were demanding to be treated with dignity: “Farmworkers are less afraid and say, ‘You can’t evict me without following the necessary procedures. I think the farmers are respecting (workers) more.’”<sup>107</sup>

A change team member noted that there was increased activism at farm level: “In (one) case, the farmer was collecting the R65 membership subscription from the workers on behalf of Sikhula Sonke for the last four years. Only last week, he finally paid Sikhula Sonke the R6,000 he owed.”<sup>108</sup>

Broader social issues were also being addressed as part of workers’ activism, as noted by a participant in the meeting:

“We are trying to create awareness about HIV, which is increasing in the farms, how to support HIV-positive people as well as looking at other groups who are discriminated against. And we also involved the youth now and the gay and lesbian people in our communities to bring them on board and change the stigma around them. There is a lot going on in our farms, we create a space for them to talk about their issues. We have also spoken around issues of abortion, which is viewed as a sin, to see what we can do to assist people.”<sup>109</sup>

### **Branch Executive Committees becoming more active**

Branch Executive Committees were taking more initiative, ownership and leadership. In relation to union work, branches were **fighting for worker rights through political action and by negotiating various issues at the farm level**. Shop stewards were taking responsibility for representing farmworkers and were taking up their own cases without an organizer. For example, at a Stellenbosch branch meeting, there was a call for mass action. The branch took initiative, took responsibility for and planned the week of action. In Ceres, where there was no organizer, the shop stewards won two cases.

An organizer explained that branch executive committee leaders have been involved in helping fight dismissals or lead the process of accessing resources like toilets or electricity. Branch executive committee members were **taking over regular organizing functions**. They were helping with recruitment, handling their own negotiations, chairing meetings and demanding to be treated fairly and respectfully by farm owners. When the branch executive committee chairperson on one farm was victimized by the farm manager for attending a meeting with an official from the Department of Labor who was visiting the farm, the BEC successfully intervened on behalf of the chairperson. In Wellington and Paarl, the BEC took initiatives in calling meetings, mobilizing workers and winning a wage increase.

---

<sup>106</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>107</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>108</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>109</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

### **Changes in union culture: Branch executive committee leaders more publically visible, less dependent upon organizers**

Branch Executive Committee leaders were less dependent upon organizers, demonstrating greater knowledge and confidence and an increased ability to solve their own problems, take action and guide the work of the union staff in support of that action. Training courses had enabled members, primarily women, to be more confident communicators.<sup>110</sup> As a result of these changes, during a week of action demanding their rights, workers were more “front and center,” which was reflected in radio and television reports on the action that featured new voices and faces. Branch Executive Committee members phoned the office or called organizers only when they were unable to solve a situation on their own. As one staff person noted, office staff increasingly recognized that “when we do things for the workers that they can do themselves, we are no better than the farmers who are like fathers and treat the workers like children—this is called paternalism. We seemed to have moved from that dependency.”

Branch executive committees have decided not to sell alcohol to raise funds, even if this is a quick way of making money, because there are too many negative consequences.

### **Specific internal union culture changes**

The union changed its practice relating to job access: It values the skills of union members and gives members the opportunity to apply for organizer positions.

Communication improved between the layers of leadership and between office staff and members. Branches were more active and members were taking more responsibility, feeling greater ownership of the organization. As one change team member noted in an observation that reflected the sentiment of the team:

“Most (Branch Executive Committees) are holding organizers accountable. In the past, some of the organizers decided for the (Branch Executive Committee). They are able to also write grievances to the Sikhula Sonke central office, so that organizers can be disciplined. National executive committees and branch executive committees both give each other monthly reports, so the NEC is also accountable downward.”<sup>111</sup>

A change team member, who also is a staff member, said: “As a staff member, I see how powerful the (branch executive committees) and (national executive committee) leaders have become. They have grown from ordinary farmworkers to outspoken, powerful leaders who sacrifice for their organization.”<sup>112</sup>

### **Growth in union membership and improved articulation of issues**

The union’s capacity to expand its membership base and be more inclusive of a wider range of workers has been strengthened by its capacity to be more effective at the farm level. Despite the challenges, the number of dues-paying members had increased by 61 percent between 2008, when Gender at Work began working with the union, and late 2011. The union had reached out to seasonal workers, African<sup>113</sup> workers and migrants (see Table I). For instance, the union was expanding into the Swartland by working

---

<sup>110</sup> Nina Benjamin interview with Patricia Dyata, November 2009.

<sup>111</sup> Change team member, Second Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>112</sup> Dyata, “Changing Seasons,” *Transforming Power*, 67.

<sup>113</sup> In South Africa’s racial jargon, racial categories still apply and so-called ‘colored’ people of mixed race origin are not considered African.

with Surplus People’s Project, which organizes committees in these areas. As a change team member noted: “More and more farm people are joining the organization. We are now recruiting people from Zimbabwe who had not been mobilized before. They are active members.”<sup>114</sup>

Although the proportion of female members (52 percent) and male members (47 percent) is similar, the union is successfully maintaining its women-led status. In a recent strike, contract negotiations included numerous issues specially addressing women’s concerns.<sup>115</sup>

**Table I**

Membership	Female	Male	Seasonal Workers	African Workers	Unemp	Total
<b>Total</b>	<b>2,895</b>	<b>2,584</b>	<b>1,144</b>	<b>693</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>5,479</b>
<b>%</b>	<b>52%</b>	<b>47%</b>	<b>20%</b>	<b>12%</b>		<b>100%</b>
Goal	60%	40%	30%	15%		100%

Sikhula Sonke’s participation in the Labour Research Service (LRS) bargaining negotiators’ conference gave the union a public platform to represent and publicize itself within the traditional union terrain. In the Gender Action Learning Process, the union’s model, method of organizing and the types of issues it negotiates were validated. The entire process strengthened the union’s confidence in its own identity and indirectly offered a critique of the traditional union approach. The LRS staff, who were encouraging negotiators to include non-wage issues as an important part of the bargaining agenda, were able to draw on the Sikhula Sonke experience to emphasize that non-wage issues would be part of these agendas only if “general” workers struggled for their inclusion.

### **Outcomes from the writing process**

The two most obvious outcomes from the writing process are the stories published by Sikhula Sonke authors in the two books, *Writing from the Inside: Stories of Hope and Change* (2010) and *Transforming Power: A Knotted Rope* (2012).

Both Patricia Dyata and Sara Claasen, who wrote the organizational stories, say that the experience helped them with their own writing. For instance, Sara told us how proud she was to have written a seven-page report for the union’s annual general meeting on her own. When an external support person read the report, she commented: “I am not making changes, this is the voice of a woman worker; this is the language of a farmworker and a woman worker.”<sup>116</sup> Patricia was involved in writing a 70-page strategic review in early 2012, and said she would not have been able to do this without the Gender at Work process.

<sup>114</sup> Change team member, Third Peer Learning Workshop, February 2010.

<sup>115</sup> From the Sikhula Sonke website, <http://www.ssonke.org.za/> (accessed on December 6, 2012). Negotiating demands included: full maternity benefits for all workers, including seasonal workers; ending wage discrimination; equal pay for equal work; housing contracts with both partners’ names; the right of women to the house in the event of a spouse or partner death or job loss; no rent deductions for siblings and dependents over age of 18; a moratorium on all evictions; a child grant; a fund to assist with alcohol and substance abuse, fetal alcohol syndrome and gender-based violence; free, accessible health care.

<sup>116</sup> Writing workshop, September, 2011.

In addition, the writing process continued to offer the two authors much needed reflective and healing time away from the intense pressures building up in the union. Both authors improved their reflection, thinking and writing skills and learned how to work in a writing partnership. The writing played a role in clarifying and reflecting back to the union key issues in its process and dynamics. The authors had to deal with their own anxieties in writing honestly about the union, in a culture that found it hard to be direct and would rather only “put the good in front.” In documenting the organization’s experience so authentically, the authors helped others benefit from their experience. They provided a role model on how to publicly share both dark and light sides.

The period during which the writing took place coincided with an extremely difficult time in the union. The first general secretary brought the union to the CCMA and left under very difficult circumstances, which also intensified tensions between staff and the national executive committee.<sup>117</sup> At the writing workshops, both authors spoke of the difficult time they had been through: In 2010, due to the financial crisis, and in 2011, due to the difficulties with the first general secretary.

In Sara’s words:

“I had a lot on my shoulders. I am tired, drained out, sad. The pressure and difficulties are a bit too much for me. It is a different time for me and the organization. I was not keen to come to this workshop. I did not want to be part of the organization, part of leadership. I was exhausted. At the office, there is no quality time for Patricia and I to talk ... (At the workshop) I realized that this is a space for me to be myself, try to relax, focus. I realized this is my story, for the first time. How I felt during that time, my emotions, the issues we were dealing with. It’s good to write. At these workshops I feel free, there is all the support, you bring out my inner bou (power or strength).”<sup>118</sup>

For Patricia: “Sara and I needed this time together. We forgot to be with each other—we were pulling each other down. Working here on our writing brings us together. We want to write something that builds the organization. How to find the best way to write so people who come after us, the (branch executive committees) and next generation can learn from our experiences.”<sup>119</sup>

The first book has been distributed both among members of the union and members of organizations within the union’s network. Patricia reports that many of these women have found strength from reading the stories.<sup>120</sup>

---

<sup>117</sup> Sara writes about this experience in “The Highest Trees,” *Transforming Power*.

<sup>118</sup> Writing Workshop, September 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Writing Workshop (day 2), September 2011.

<sup>120</sup> Nina Benjamin interview with Patricia Dyata, 2013.

### 3.7 Conclusion

The Gender at Work Action Learning Process with Sikhula Sonke strengthened the efforts of this young union in developing its independent organizational infrastructure and organizational procedures, helping it to do so in ways that were congruent with its espoused commitment to gender equality. The process ended in February 2010.<sup>121</sup> Since then, the union has faced many difficult challenges and internal conflicts. Although the two later writing processes created some space in which the authors achieved a little distance from and were able to reflect upon the organizational pain, many challenges remain. From all the feedback at the peer learning meetings, it appears the process helped the union reframe old ways of thinking, while the follow-up support helped put these new ideas into action. However, with all the internal and external crises the union faced after the process ended, it is clear that Gender at Work's engagement was not long enough to sufficiently disrupt long-held habits which easily resurface during times of crisis.

What seems clear from this case is that the rapidly changing context of agriculture in South Africa, combined with the complex and often traumatic histories of farmworkers—generational struggles with alcoholism, poverty, low education levels and gender-based violence—require much more time to deeply embed more equal norms. The story shows what is possible when safe spaces of reflection and support are created to give workers distance from the harsh realities of everyday life.

An interesting theme that emerged in this case study is that despite the large numbers of active women members and women leaders, and the centrality of women's specific interests in defining the union's agenda, the union still found it necessary to proactively work against and unlearn the consequences of organizational hierarchy and associated exclusions. It had to pay attention to the **how** of everyday activities to be more inclusive of less skilled members. Positive change and behavior needs to be nurtured over time and must be intentional and explicit. Organizations thus have a role in educating and building structures for accountability and care over time.

#### **The importance of personal change and individual struggle in relation to collective struggle**

Sikhula Sonke's fight against the ravages of alcohol includes a good example of an individual struggle linked to a collective struggle. As Sara Claasen explains in her story, *Teardrops of Perseverance*,<sup>122</sup> one of the more oppressive historical aspects of Western Cape farm life is the iniquitous "dop system" in which farmworkers were paid with wine. This resulted in a lasting legacy of low wages and high rates of alcoholism and its associated aggression, violence and abuse. To build a strong union, to have confident leaders who can negotiate powerfully and to have less violent and more respectful relationships both in the union and on the farms, it is extremely helpful for the farmworkers to address this legacy in constructive ways. Confronting alcoholism is therefore simultaneously strategic for change at the personal, organizational and farm levels.

Patricia's story of giving up alcohol, which she used as a vehicle for numbing her pain, highlights these interconnections. First, she had to confront her own anger and own up to her problem and take action to deal with it. The union also had to confront her and let her know that drunken behavior in public was not appropriate for a union official. As much as she had to learn to overcome her own anger, she also

---

<sup>121</sup> Besides this intervention, the union had access to various training programs offered by other labor service organizations such as the Alternative Information Development Centre (AIDC), International Labour Research and Information Group (ILRIG) and Khanya College.

<sup>122</sup> Claasen, "Teardrops of Perseverance," *Writing from the Inside*, 57-59.

had to confront her fear in relation to her partner and had to learn to refuse to be abused. In all of this, she found support from the Gender at Work facilitators, the peer learners and the union, as well as other external support. Not only did Patricia transform her own personal life for the better, but this change enabled her in her role as general secretary to be more focused, clear and analytical. She also became committed to helping the union change its own norm of supporting the sale of alcohol as a fundraising strategy at branch level. Moreover, the union now discourages members from running shebeens from their homes. In Patricia's words: "We have made it clear that Sikhula Sonke will not support workers involved in this kind of activity if they are evicted from the farm. We explain that we have to do this as a collective, a community. You are not just breaking up your home but you are breaking up the community."<sup>123</sup>

There are examples in the case study that demonstrate how an individual woman's confidence, strength and skill significantly enhance the capacity of the union to respond more effectively to farmworkers' everyday needs. When they build their self-esteem and address their own histories of abuse, discrimination and victimization, the women and men of Sikhula Sonke can be effective leaders and active members. As it is, overcoming the implications of years of living under a "master-slave" relationship and the impact of internalized oppression on the union's culture is an ongoing process and cannot be resolved in a few years.

#### **Creating new norms takes a long time**

The 18-month Gender Action Learning Process introduced union members and leaders to a different way of working together, of reflecting and understanding power. It laid a foundation for the union to make significant strides toward meeting its objective of building a second layer of women leaders. Many of the individuals involved transformed their sense of themselves. However, after that process ended, the union was beset by a severe financial crisis and the loss of its general secretary. Significant tensions and conflicts emerged between staff and members. Without the funds to continue the training program and a reduced capacity to service workers, the original goals set out during the Gender at Work process were temporarily derailed.

Although the union has made inroads in transforming the deep structural norm toward supporting women leaders, sustaining this vision remains a challenge. President Sara Claasen describes how stressful and challenging it is to be a leader in a context where she regularly fears judgment and has to deal with the consequences of making difficult decisions. She feels that the president's position is not respected.<sup>124</sup> For Sikhula Sonke as a whole, it remains a challenge to create an emotionally supportive organization that fosters warm and friendly relationships with the needs and demands of making decisions in the best interests of the organization. Tensions between paid staff (who are also referred to as comrades) and the elected members continue to test them.<sup>125</sup> Building greater synergy between the branch executive committees and the new national executive committees remains high on the current agenda.

Perhaps it would help the union to pay more attention to the structural power differences that exist between a politically elected leadership and a nominated paid staff. The union aims for being worker-controlled and the elected leadership has policymaking and final decision-making power. However, the

---

<sup>123</sup> Patricia Dyata, interview with author, December 2012.

<sup>124</sup> Claasen, "The Highest Trees Always Get the Most Wind," *Writing from the Inside: Stories of Hope and Change*, 2011.

<sup>125</sup> Interviews with Johnny Boy (current National Executive committee treasurer), Dean van Rooy (donor), Patricia Dyata (general secretary) and Sara Claasen (president), November-December 2012 and January 2013.

union relies on paid staff for the day-to-day work of recruitment, organizing, skills building and ongoing program management, which accrues a kind of practical power. Further, membership dues have not been sufficient to pay staff salaries, which are supported by donor funds and so not linked to recruiting members. That a significant part of Sikhula Sonke resources comes from external donors creates an NGO type of accountability which lies in tension with the union's aspiration for worker control. As a result, elected union leaders do not have the economic power to hold staff accountable. Paid staff, who are former farmworkers, are now more protected than those laboring on the farms. They have made a leap in access to skills, resources and earning power and are now in a less oppressive working environment. The differences are stark. These were aspects of the informal norms within Sikhula Sonke that emerged, with staff seeing worker leaders<sup>126</sup> as unreasonable. In turn, worker leaders viewed staff as not completely accountable or efficient.

Some of these structural tensions contribute to the ongoing conflicts in understanding what is worker controlled and what is staff controlled. This is an aspect of informal norms that the Gender at Work process did not address. Despite all these challenges, everyone agrees that growth in the branch executive committees is visible and that shop stewards are active, love what they do and have achieved significant results.

It is impossible to determine to what extent the Gender at Work process enabled the union to weather the storms of the crisis it underwent following its participation in the Gender at Work process. The Sikhula Sonke story demonstrates that the Gender Action Learning Process and the reflective spaces it offers has great potential to build women worker leaders. But the union's circumstances and its resources determine which parts of the process can be sustained. The president believes that the union would benefit from participating in a second round of gender action learning to help deepen the process begun in the first round. The union finds it difficult to create sufficient ongoing, safe, reflective supportive spaces to tackle the complexity of power dynamics it confronts daily.

---

<sup>126</sup> Worker leaders here refer primarily to elected representatives in the national executive committee structure but they could also include branch executives.

## **Chapter 4**

### **BCAWU and HOSPERSA: Critical Reflection and Action for Gender Equality**

#### **Section 1: Introduction**

This chapter focuses on two unions—the Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) and the Health and Other Service Personnel Trade Union of South Africa (HOSPERSA). Both unions are currently involved in an 18-month Gender Action Learning Process (GALP) jointly run by Gender at Work and Labour Research Service (LRS). At the time of writing, the GALP process, which started in January 2012, was incomplete. Hence, this case study attempts to capture some of the insights as they emerge.

This case study is structured as follows. Section 2 outlines the design of the 2012-2013 GALP process; Section 3 focuses on BCAWU's change project and emerging insights. Section 4 focuses on HOSPERSA's change project and emerging insight.

#### **Section 2: Design of the 2012-2013 GALP**

In 2011, Gender at Work, in collaboration with the LRS, invited five organizations to take part in the 2012–2013 GALP. To participate, organizations must represent a diversity of interests and experiences, have worked with both men and women on gender equality, HIV/AIDS, gender-based violence, diverse sexualities and identities; and engaged in socio-economic development issues for women. Three of the five organizations participating in the GALP are trade unions: HOSPERSA, BCAWU and the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union (SADSAWU). The others are a rural development organization, the Kimberley-based DOCKDA (Dioceses of Oudtshoorn, Cape Town, Keimoes, Upington and De Aar) and the Johannesburg-based LGEP (Lesbian and Gay Equality Project).

Each of the three trade unions is affiliated with a different national trade union federation: HOSPERSA is affiliated with FEDUSA (Federation of Unions of South Africa), a non-politically aligned federation. BCAWU is affiliated with the Pan-African NACTU (National Council of Trade Unions); and SADSAWU is affiliated with COSATU (Congress of South African Trade Unions), which is aligned with South Africa's governing political party, the African National Congress (ANC).

The 2012-2013 GALP has taken on a slightly different form compared with previous GALPs. In previous GALPs, change teams were free to work with any theme they chose. In this process, the focus is specifically on the triad of gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS and socioeconomic empowerment. While this is partly a result of the supporting donor's requirements, the facilitators saw this as an opportunity to explore challenges relevant to most South African civil society organizations. From our experience, organizations addressing each of these struggles need to confront the deeply-held cultural norms and exclusionary practices that perpetuate unequal gender power relations across the triad both within their organizations and within the communities in which they work. This GALP process offers organizations in different geographic locations, working on different aspects of this process, an opportunity to share their understanding and deepen their practice.

The following chart provides an outline of the current GALP.

<b>Date</b>	<b>Event</b>	<b>Purpose</b>
February 28, 2012	Orientation meeting	Participants from the five change teams are introduced to each other and to the facilitators and learn about the participating organizations and the communities they serve. This is the first step in building a learning community.
April 12-13, 2012	BCAWU Hearing the Stories Workshop	Change teams reflect upon their organization's history, values, culture, key programs and challenges, and the issues related to gender-based violence, HIV and women's economic empowerment they would like to focus on in the 18-month process.
March 10-11, 2012	HOSPERSA Hearing the Stories Workshop	Change teams reflect upon their organization's history, values, culture, key programs and challenges, and the issues related to gender-based violence, HIV and women's economic empowerment they would like to focus on in the 18-month process.
April 23-26, 2012	First Peer Learning Workshop	Change teams explore conceptual ideas related to promoting gender equality in organizations, in the community and in participants' work environments. They reflect on what we are collectively learning about how to challenge the norms that underpin women's economic empowerment, gender-based violence and HIV. They strengthen the sense of relationship between teams and the Gender at Work team to support ongoing education and development and to develop clear steps for the change interventions—including the ongoing relationship between change teams and the rest of the organization. They are introduced to the idea of writing about experience.
May – November 2012	Teams implement projects with the facilitators' support.	
November 6-9, 2012	Second Peer Learning Workshop	Change teams reflect upon the lessons learned during the past six months, provide feedback on activities, deepen the analysis of gender, culture and power which are the thematic areas guiding the work, explore concepts that assist in the analysis and implementation of programs, deepen the relationship with the peer learning community and chart out clear plans and interventions.
November 2012–May 2013	Teams implement projects with facilitators' support.	
May 2013	Third Peer Learning Workshop	

### Section 3: BCAWU Change Process

This section describes the history and institutional context of BCAWU and the process of participating in the GALP. It includes a description of the change project and how it operated at the personal, workplace and community levels, as well as the outcomes and emerging insight from the process.

#### Context and History of BCAWU

The Building Construction and Allied Workers Union (BCAWU) identifies as the first independent black trade union to organize in the construction sector. The union's core values are "worker control" and the pan-African principle of African solidarity.

The union was formed in March 1975 and was first established in a large construction company in Johannesburg, expanding from there to other areas in the city. BCAWU organizes in the private sector and is engaged with workers in sectors traditionally regarded as more difficult to organize, such as building and construction and building materials and cement products. By the mid-1980s, BCAWU membership totaled 40,700.

Generally, trade union membership in the construction sector is relatively low when compared with the rate of unionization in South Africa primarily because of the difficulty of organizing mostly migrant workers on short-term contracts. The ILO paints a bleak picture of the construction sector, claiming that it typifies the lack of decent work; lack of protection against dismissal; insecure employment (for instance, outsourcing and flexible labor practices); high levels of unemployment among temporary workers; and little possibility of turning back the clock to a time where there were more direct forms of employment.<sup>127</sup> The construction sector is comprised of big multinational companies at the top and organizational fragmentation at the bottom, including sub-contractors and sub-sub-contractors who pay little attention to health and safety standards and skills development. Even with the myriad of sub-contractors, the large multinational companies should be held responsible for the conditions construction workers face. But too often, these multinationals publicly support black economic empowerment and the creation of opportunities for women while relying on sub-contractors to do the dirty job of keeping labor costs to a minimum.<sup>128</sup>

Given the fluctuating nature of employment in the construction sector and the reliance on limited duration contracts, BCAWU's membership figures have not been stable. Prior to the build-up of the 2010 Soccer World Cup in South Africa, BCAWU membership declined to between 15,000 and 25,000. At this stage, according to the 2005 Building and Wood Workers International (BWI)<sup>129</sup> affiliates database, women made up 6 percent of union members. From about 2007, major world cup infrastructure developments saw a massive boom in the construction sector and a huge rise in trade union membership. At the height of the construction boom at the beginning of 2010, BCAWU's membership stood at approximately 39,000. However, a subsequent decline in construction projects,

---

<sup>127</sup> "The Construction Industry in the Twenty-First Century: Its Image, Employment Prospects and Skill Requirements," International Labor Organization, 2001, <http://www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/gb/docs/gb283/pdf/tmcitr.pdf> (accessed on May 29, 2013).

<sup>128</sup> Benjamin, Nina, "BWI Baseline Gender Survey," research report presented at BWI workshop on March 8, 2011.

<sup>129</sup> Building and Wood Workers International is a global union federation of 350 trade unions organizing in the building, materials, wood, forestry and allied industries.

wide-scale retrenchments and the ending of limited duration contracts have led to a decline in BCAWU's membership to approximately 32,000, of which 16 percent are women.<sup>130</sup>

BCAWU is financially supported by member dues, and when membership fluctuates, the union's sustainability is threatened. Recruiting and maintaining members is therefore a priority. In an industry characterized by migration and short-term contracts, the union is faced with the ongoing challenge of membership turnover as workers complete contracts or simply lose their jobs. Maintaining membership means addressing the working and living conditions of workers on site. While women were traditionally restricted to office and cleaning jobs in the construction sector, they are increasingly digging trenches alongside men. The harsh, unfriendly, and at times, unsafe, environment surrounding traditionally male jobs poses specific challenges for women, such as the absence of hygienic toilet facilities and equipment and clothing that are not suited to women's bodies and particular needs.

To transform this male-dominated building and construction industry and provide more employment opportunities for women, government and organizations such as the Construction Industry Board and the Master Builders Association promote women contractors in the building and construction sector. Some changes seem to have been made at the contractor level: the South African Women in Construction Association claims its database of women contractors grew from 60 at its inception in 1999 to more than 2,000 by 2007. The previous premier of the economically vibrant Gauteng province, Mbazima Shilowa, also indicated that between 2004 and 2007, the provincial government had awarded bids worth more than \$35 million to women-owned companies for the construction of thousands of houses.<sup>131</sup>

Skills training for women has also increased their participation in the sector. One of the objectives of the national Construction, Education and Training Authority (CETA), which focuses on bolstering training and skills development throughout the construction sector, is mobilizing greater numbers of women to participate in the construction industry through accrediting courses and apprenticeships, which increase access to training opportunities for women.

In recent years, the number of women contractors and entrepreneurs has significantly increased. What is not clear, however, is the extent to which women are entering skilled positions in the industry.<sup>132</sup>

Trade union officials and worker-leaders confirm that women are entering extremely low-paid and unskilled jobs, for example, as "finishers" who clean the tiles at the end of the construction process. These women are typically employed on short-term contracts, some only day to day. Some women are being trained to enter more skilled positions, such as crane drivers, but there are very few.

As an affiliate of the global union federation, BWI, BCAWU has been involved in a more than 12-year BWI program to integrate gender perspectives into trade union work, to promote the rights of women workers in construction and to level the playing field in a sector based on "survival of the fittest." A BWI

---

<sup>130</sup> The author was unable to obtain exact figures because no up-to-date database exists. The figures provided are estimates from BCAWU national office holders.

<sup>131</sup> Women Flourish in Construction," SouthAfrica.com, August 17, 2007, <http://www.southafrica.info/business/economy/development/sawic.htm> (accessed on May 29, 2013). As one of the largest procurers of goods and services, the South African government's bidding (tender) process is closely tied to black economic empowerment because such contract opportunities help redress past imbalances of previously marginalized groups.

<sup>132</sup> The most recent Labor Force Survey noted that of the 1,012,000 construction-sector employees in the second quarter of 2012, 120,000 were women, but there is no clear breakdown of the types of jobs that these women hold.

report on the status of women, drafted as South Africa entered the World Cup construction boom, described BCAWU as a union which “aggressively sought to address and to increase women’s membership and equitable participation in their trade union structures.”

The South African government’s focus on employment equity and the need to transform the male-dominated construction sector has further inspired BCAWU’s focus on gender equity. Increasing union membership by recruiting more women is one of its key priorities.

### **Participation in the Gender Action Learning Program (GALP)**

At the end of 2011, the LRS facilitated a series of meetings with BCAWU leaders to discuss their possible participation in the 2012-2013 round of the GALP.

During 2011 and early 2012, BCAWU National Educator Bongani Dlamini participated in an LRS-initiated process focused on supporting organized labor’s engagement with the National Strategic Plan for HIV and AIDS, STIs and tuberculosis (TB), with a particular focus on the gendered nature of the HIV epidemic. Using elements of the GALP, LRS structured a series of workshops that enabled unions to critically reflect on their HIV programs. In this process, Bongani spoke at length about the challenges BCAWU needed to take into account as part of finding effective strategies to address the spread of HIV and AIDS in the construction sector. Some of these challenges include working with groups of male workers who have lived for long periods in all male environments away from their families. In BCAWU’s assessment, these conditions increased the likelihood of multiple sexual partners. With the “hard life on the sites,” workers often have a disregard for their own health and well-being and engage in unprotected sex even if they are aware of the dangers of contracting and spreading HIV. The sexual behaviors of many of the workers in turn increases their likelihood of contracting and spreading HIV to sexual partners from the neighboring communities and to wives and partners they might sporadically visit.

In Bongani’s assessment, the dual challenge of addressing the workplace conditions and the construction site environment as well as addressing the attitudes and sexual behavior of workers, are essential elements of any HIV strategy in the construction sector. In his view, women’s entry onto the sites, even if in small numbers, offered the union the opportunity to directly engage men and women working in the same space about their working and living conditions and their attitudes, fears and aspirations. Women would make it a priority to demand improved conditions like family responsibility leave, and through union-initiated engagement, it would be possible to shift men’s consciousness so they would demand to spend more time with their families. Bongani believed that if the union provided a sufficiently supportive environment in which women could raise their concerns, it was likely that issues such as combating sexual harassment could become part of the union agenda, and this would open up space to deal with sexual attitudes and behaviors.

When the opportunity arose for a Gender Action Learning Process focused on gender-based violence, HIV and AIDS, and women’s economic empowerment, Gender at Work saw BCAWU as a perfect candidate for the process. BCAWU’s openness and willingness to look at its own practices, to critically analyze existing strategies for dealing with these issues and to find innovative strategies through reflection and dialogue, laid the basis for inviting BCAWU to be part of the GALP.

Bongani and Gender at Work facilitator, Nina Benjamin, in her role as LRS Gender Program coordinator, had worked together and so had established a relationship of trust. However, the Gender at Work facilitators were mindful of the need for broader “buy in” from the union to a partnership with Gender at Work. Bongani, in his position as national educator, had the authority to motivate union

involvement. However, Gender at Work facilitators were concerned that BCAWU might view the process as “another education program” without realizing the kind of involvement necessary for the organizational change project to be successful. It was only after the first introductory meeting and the “Hearing Our Stories” process that it became clear to other senior members of BCAWU that the GALP is not a gender training program, but rather a supportive process for a self-initiated organizational change project in which the union could explore strategies for addressing what it had identified as its dual challenge of unequal and often violent gender relations and the spread of HIV and AIDS.

The BCAWU change team which engaged in the GALP believed that simply calling for quotas to increase the number of women in the workplace would not be sustainable because women would not be able to work under present workplace conditions. In their view, changing the construction sector and the union to be more gender sensitive and women friendly required the presence of women—but before that could happen, fundamental changes needed to occur to recruit women.

For BCAWU change team members, the challenge is to begin raising the consciousness of men in the union. These men, along with the few active women in the union, can then take up the dual challenge of dealing with unfriendly workplace conditions while recruiting more women into the workplace and into the union.

Interestingly, change team members assumed that women would lead a new focus on decent work conditions that extended beyond wages to issues like occupational health and safety, parental rights and family responsibility leave. In the words of a BCAWU shop steward, women would “bring their personal lives to work.”<sup>133</sup> Women taking a lead in the union would then play a role in opening spaces to sensitize and raise the conscious of male union leaders and male worker leaders who are key in the collective bargaining processes.

Along with the sensitization and consciousness-raising process, the change team planned to facilitate women taking traditional male roles in the union—for example, as negotiators and organizers. The change team saw consciousness-raising, together with more visible women leaders, as key to shaping a collective bargaining agenda that addresses the dehumanizing working and living conditions of workers—such as the lack of recreational facilities or family accommodations—which in turn fuel social problems like high levels of alcohol abuse, gender-based violence, intimate partner violence, sexual harassment, the spread of HIV and aggressive behavior between male workers.

## **GALP Meetings and Process**

### **Orientation meeting**

With the agreement from BCAWU national officials that the GALP process would be part of the Education Department’s program to develop actions to address gender equality and HIV, the BCAWU team was invited to participate in the GALP introductory meeting on February 28. Two BCAWU members took part: Bongani, in his capacity as national educator and Clement Maredi, a young, newly recruited organizer.<sup>134</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Lindiwe Shiloane, BCAWU workshop, August 28, 2012.

<sup>134</sup> Bongani Dlamini had planned to invite two women officials to this meeting, but one woman tragically passed away and the other was unable to attend.

The orientation meeting was the BCAWU change team's first encounter with the four other participating organizations. The BCAWU change team was struck by the diversity of the group, and in particular the different trade union federations, sectors, geographical areas, ages, races and sexual orientations.<sup>135</sup> For the BCAWU change team, this was definitely a shift out of its "comfort zone" and Bongani in particular was interested in how the diversity would assist BCAWU's planning process. Sharing across organizations and the more detailed explanation of the GALP process convinced the BCAWU team to commit the organization to be part of the GALP.

The one-day orientation meeting was followed by the two-day "Hearing Our Stories" meeting April 12-13, 2012, at the BCAWU national office. Four male BCAWU members participated in the workshop: Reuben Makgoba, the international officer, Albert Masuku, an experienced organizer; Clement Maredi, a young, newly-recruited organizer; and David Mabitsela, a worker-leader. As part of an indication of the organization's commitment to the process, BCAWU General Secretary Narius Moloto welcomed the GALP facilitators and indicated he was pleased that the union had been chosen to be part of the process. Both Bongani and Clement, who had been part of the orientation meeting, were unable to participate.

The two female Gender at Work facilitators, Nina Benjamin and Michel Friedman, were in a totally male environment once they stepped into the BCAWU offices. Roles usually performed by women, like making tea or working in the reception area, were carried out by young men. What was also striking was that everyone referred to each other by surname prefixed by "Mr." as a sign of respect and dignity—a conscious response to the breakdown of dignity and respect black people experienced during apartheid.

With an entirely male change team, the meeting opened with *tai chi* exercises which helped to create a relaxed and introspective atmosphere, despite the busy work environment, where change team members had one eye on the door in case they were urgently needed in the office.

In the first exercise of this meeting, participants drew a picture of themselves and introduced themselves using the picture. Albert Masuku the oldest and longest standing member of the BCAWU change team who had joined the union in 1979 as a worker, summed up what the exercise had meant for him in the following way: "This way of doing introductions has brought me into the meeting as a person, touched down into me as a man." All change team members described their childhoods, their work experiences, their dreams and hopes and also some of their fears. This was possibly the first time that members of the change team heard each other's personal stories. They described being part of the union from a very human and personal perspective. They spoke about their passion and commitment to their work, about their personal financial challenges and the stress this caused in their family lives.

Change team members developed a collage to portray BCAWU's history. They depicted a history of black male workers that was intertwined with the oppression of the apartheid system and the migrant labor system, in which their families were left behind in rural areas. They explained that in responding to these alienating conditions, the union embraces Africanism as a way of uniting workers and keeping alive their sense of humanity.

Participants further discussed how the conditions of black workers in the construction sector have not fundamentally changed after apartheid, despite numerous labor laws protecting worker rights. For black male construction workers, work and working conditions remain dehumanizing, insecure, unsafe

---

<sup>135</sup> This was noted in a post-meeting interview with Nina Benjamin.

and without any consideration for the family and social needs of workers. This is particularly the case for workers on limited duration contracts. However, there have been changes in an increase in the number of women entering the construction sector into non-traditional jobs, that is, jobs on the site and not only as “tea girls with no prospect of any other kind of work” in the offices. The change team believes that the entry of women into construction has up to now not created any significant change in workers’ working and living conditions.

In the two-day “Hearing Our Stories” meeting, participants began to see the value of taking time out of their busy schedules to speak freely and reflect upon their work and personal lives. Working together as a team, listening respectfully and speaking honestly, they reported feeling a sense of integration between themselves as people and the work of the organization. They began to feel that as a group, they could remain individuals with their specific needs, ideas and challenges but also with a sense of collective strength that enhances their analytical and strategic thinking.

### **The First Peer Learning Workshop**

The First Peer Learning Workshop followed soon after the Hearing Our Stories workshop.<sup>136</sup> This time, the BCAWU change team was reduced to two participants: Bongani and Albert Masuku. It seemed that the short time between the two workshops had not allowed Bongani (who was driving the process), to consolidate a consistent change team.

BCAWU change team members carried through the insights from the Hearing Our Stories meeting into the First Peer Learning Workshop. They presented BCAWU’s organizational history, highlighting key features of the sector, changes in the sector since the collapse of apartheid and the gendered nature of the sector. They described the dehumanizing conditions of workers in general while pointing out differences in the conditions facing male and female workers, the attitudes of male workers toward female workers and the entrenched patriarchal and sexist behavior of male workers who have little regard for women (whether fellow workers, women in the communities where they lived or their sexual partners)—beyond seeing them as sexual objects.

During this meeting, change team members highlighted what they saw as their vision for the 18-month change project:

“In the next 18 months, we would like to develop a strategy of recruiting women to join the organization and encourage them to take leadership positions. In addition to this, we would like to improve the conditions of employment for women.”<sup>137</sup>

The diversity of the participating organizations and the safe, nonthreatening atmosphere the facilitators created, enabled participants to pose genuine questions to the BCAWU change team—questions motivated by a desire to get a better understanding and to learn and not motivated by competition to recruit members in the construction sector. This honesty, openness and lack of any hidden agenda from those posing questions enabled the change team to respond non-defensively and to deepen its analysis even as they formulated their responses. For instance, when a participant asked: “Apart from recruiting women, what are some of the things you are doing for women empowerment?” the change team first responded with BCAWU resolutions to increase women’s participation in the union. But even as they

---

<sup>136</sup> First Peer Learning Workshop, April 23-26, 2012.

<sup>137</sup> From the minutes of First Peer Learning Workshop, April 23-26, 2012.

responded, Bongani recognized the limitations of focusing only on resolutions. Later in this workshop, the change team elaborated on its realization that formal resolutions were limited.

### **Mentoring Process between the First and Second Peer Learning Workshops**

Between the First and Second Peer Learning Workshops, the GALP facilitator was in regular contact with the change team, providing mentoring support, acting as a sounding board and assessing the change plan.<sup>138</sup> The change team then presented the Gender Action Learning Workshop plan to the BCAWU leadership, who endorsed and supported the plan.

The change team held a series of discussions with BCAWU organizers, who committed themselves to focus on the goal of increasing the participation of women in the union to at least 30 percent, while ensuring that women leaders would make up between 5 percent and 10 percent of BCAWU leadership. The organizers were interested in more than just numbers, however—they also committed to developing strategies that focused on the real interests, needs and views of women in the sector, especially women working in low-paid, outsourced jobs.

BCAWU organizers identified an example when they had taken up the rights of two women working on a site cleaning tiles. “There was a workplace agreement that workers would receive a performance bonus if they completed the work before the time. When the women tile cleaners completed their work, they asked about their performance bonus and were told by management that this only applied to the actual construction workers. BCAWU challenged the issue on behalf of all the women tile cleaners, including those not unionized, arguing that their work had value to the construction and that the agreement included all workers.”<sup>139</sup> This example served as a model for advancing the interests of women at the lowest rungs of employment.

As part of the attempt at “changing the face of the union to be more women friendly,”<sup>140</sup> BCAWU had recruited three young women interns. These intern positions had previously been held by young men. The intern positions offered the women the possibility of establishing themselves as permanent BCAWU employees.

The third mentoring session included the change team and seven women worker leaders.<sup>141</sup> This session was an important step for BCAWU because it was the first time a group of women workers had been brought together in a forum with the national educator and an organizer to discuss their specific needs, challenges and thoughts about what the union should be doing to recruit and maintain women in the union.

### **The Second Peer Learning Workshop**

The Second Peer Learning Workshop took place November 6-9, 2012. BCAWU was represented by two men, Bongani and Kululwe Nqeketo, and two women, Nokuphiwa Dlamini and Maria Masuku.

---

<sup>138</sup> Mentoring meetings were held on June 4, 2012, July 20, 2012 and August 28, 2012.

<sup>139</sup> Albert Masuku in discussion with author, May 2012.

<sup>140</sup> From Hearing the Stories Report, April 12-13, 2012.

<sup>141</sup> The third mentoring session took place on August 28, 2012. Attendees included seven women worker leaders, Bongani Dlamini and the three new members of the change team, including a young, newly recruited male organizer, Kululwe Nqeketo. The two new women members were Nokuphiwa Dlamini, one of the interns, and a more experienced official from the Limpopo Region, Maria Masuku.

The team presented its reflections on the change plan over the previous six months, including a list of activities and processes the team had undertaken to create a more gender-sensitive approach to organizing, and discussed its goal to recruit more women into the union both as leaders and as worker leaders. The change team shared how it had created a safe space for women workers to speak about the issues affecting them, issues that up to now had remained almost hidden. Yet it took additional coaching by the GALP facilitator for the team to capture and reflect the thinking, feeling, team building and reflection that went into making the activities possible. This additional analysis revealed new challenges and insights. As Dlamini described it:

“One of the difficulties we have been facing is the continuous changes in the GALP team. I think that now we are more settled with this. We have managed to stick to our plan and we have definitely increased our recruitment. One of our key objectives has been to get more women involved in the union. We are succeeding in doing this—for example, we have more women as part of education and we are bringing more women into the union. We have had workshops where we are dealing with the micro and macro issues as regards women, the workplace and gender. As part of our sensitization program, we have had a Women’s Day celebration with (our federation) NACTU, but BCAWU was the driver of the event. We see this as empowering women but also changing the face of the union. We are focusing on equal treatment and equal pay.”<sup>142</sup>

Change team members noted also that they had made advances in increasing women’s awareness that they could take on jobs which are seen as the preserve of men, including construction, driving a Caterpillar or being shop stewards:

“We are also making more women aware that they are able to do all the different kinds of jobs in construction. We have, for example, a shop steward at Khusile who is working with a team of 10 women. They are focusing on health and safety issues. The idea is that as a women shop steward, she takes the lead in dealing with issues. As regards our different leadership styles and strengths, Maria has been working as an administrator. Now she is moving from a more rigid focus on admin duties to a more flexible position in relation to organizing. This is assisting in increasing the profile of women as officials.”<sup>143</sup>

BCAWU actively supports women in these new roles, pointing out that mistakes can be made and that women should not be afraid to try, while at the same time providing skills training and mentoring support to women: “The idea is that we can make mistakes but we must just not be too scared to try. In the beginning, this was very tough, many of the workers are illiterate and did not want to listen to a women speaking. But now when they see, for example, a young woman driving a Caterpillar, they feel more comfortable with women taking on some leadership roles.”<sup>144</sup>

“We are firstly focusing on capacity building to build self-esteem. We are also dealing with skills development. We have a pilot project for NSD3 (National Skills Development Level 3, part of the CETA training)—that is, focusing on skills development for low-paid workers. We are involved in the placements of women in local companies. We are also focusing on upgrading women into different levels.”<sup>145</sup>

---

<sup>142</sup> Bongani Dlamini at the Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid.

<sup>144</sup> Nokuphiwa Dlamini at Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

<sup>145</sup> Bongani Dlamini at the Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

“Lastly, we are monitoring and evaluating the relationship between men and women in the union and where we can in the workplace.”<sup>146</sup>

For the change team, the Second Peer Learning Workshop provided “a space for the group to work as a team, a space for reflection, a space to come up with new ideas, as we found ourselves in one space and not all working on our own. We were able to think back on what we are doing, how we are contributing to the change plan and it helped us come up with new ideas.”<sup>147</sup>

During the workshop, the change team was introduced to Gender at Work’s integral framework,<sup>148</sup> and through this process, team members explored in greater detail the change they were trying to make. They started with an assumption that to challenge social norms, consciousness and formal rules were critical: “If people are conscientised and aware of their environment and context, it will be easy to challenge social norms. It is also easy to claim your rights if you are protected by the constitution. For example, the national Basic Conditions of Employment Act provides minimal maternity protection and this acts as a starting point when you are struggling for the improvement in maternity conditions.”<sup>149</sup>

They then located the work they are doing in the GALP framework, noting that they emphasize formal rules and work on shifting consciousness:

“We put a lot of emphasis in formal rules as this is our bible. We use statutes and procedures to argue our case in the union and in the CCMA and labor court. We also work in women and men consciousness but do not do much in the improvement of access to resources. We believe that procedures and policies are important as they impose sanctions on those who do not comply with legislation and if you do not have a piece of legislation that expresses your right, it becomes hard to claim them.”

They concluded the exercise by identifying that they should be doing more to improve access to resources and to change informal rules.

As the team deepened its analysis through using the framework, team members identified their assumption for starting the planning process: “Our assumption is that we work to improve workers’ access to resources and give awareness-raising through trainings. We also thought that recruiting women will make construction workers relate differently to them and start respecting them.”<sup>150</sup>

By the end of the Second Peer Learning Workshop, the BCAWU change team had a plan of action that included sensitizing union officials and leadership to gender equality and recruiting more women construction workers and providing them with training to promote more women into union leadership structures.

### **GALP’s impact**

The change process with BCAWU had begun with initial discussions with Bongani at the end of 2011. A year later, the change process has become a key component of the union’s Education Department. Some of the most significant organizational processes during this period are the following:

---

<sup>146</sup> Nokuphiwa Dlamini at Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

<sup>147</sup> Nokuphiwa Dlamini at second peer learning November 6-9, 2012.

<sup>148</sup> See explanation of framework in the Introductory Chapter.

<sup>149</sup> Bongani Dlamini at Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

<sup>150</sup> Nokuphiwa at Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

- Key male officials who participated in the Hearing the Stories process recognized that creating gender equality—a term often used loosely in the union context—needs an ongoing process of organizational and personal change. These officials have played an important role in trying to find spaces where this view can be shared with other BCAWU members.
- A layer of BCAWU organizers has grappled with searching out and developing appropriate strategies for recruiting women into the trade union. Organizers have met to assess recruitment and they have engaged with women officials and women worker leaders to develop appropriate strategies.
- Although young men were previously recruited into union intern positions, over the past few months, BCAWU recruited a group of four young women interns.

The number of women recruited into the union has increased, as has women’s participation in the union, where they now articulate their needs and views in general meetings, are more confident and willing to act as shop stewards and are more vocal within education programs.

The BCAWU change project has underscored that change is a slow but deep process in which personal and organizational change are linked.

### **Changing power relationships**

“Being the change you want to see” is a theme emerging in many of the Gender at Work Action Learning Processes. Bongani, the key driver of the BCAWU change project, has furthered this idea by making a personal commitment to work with union leaders and carry through the idea of sensitizing male organizers by acting as an example. As a senior male official in the union, he is leading the way by attempting to create spaces for women leaders to be active in the union and by addressing the fears of young, newly-appointed women officials. Bongani describes his commitment to making BCAWU more gender sensitive:

“I have organized for women officials to accompany male organizers on company visits to make contact with the few women workers in the workplace and to sensitize the male organizers. Internally, I ensured that the young women official who was on probation and discovered she was pregnant understood her labor rights and felt secure in her position—sending out a message that the union was ‘practicing what it preached.’”<sup>151</sup>

The willingness of seasoned organizers to work with less experienced women leaders shows an openness to work as a team, but is also an indication of their willingness to allow officials to step into their territory—the company where they are organizing. The organizers are not fighting to keep control over their territory and are beginning to address their own relationship to power.

Part of the strategy of “sharing the lessons” of the August meeting with the organizers was for the change team members to start accompanying organizers in their visits to companies. Says Nokuphiwa: “I have been working with specific companies with the assistance of one of the organizers. Together, for example, we have visited the company Johnson Tiles. My focus has been to find ways of opening up discussions with the women workers at the company and in this way the organizer also becomes familiar with the issues.”<sup>152</sup>

---

<sup>151</sup> Author Interview with Bongani Dlamini, November 2012.

<sup>152</sup> Nokuphiwa Dlamini, speaking at the Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

For the women leaders involved in these visits, the process was initially daunting but also exhilarating. One woman reflected on the experience, “As a young woman newly part of BCAWU, I visited one of the construction sites to discuss the issue of health and safety. It felt like going into a man’s world. When you go onto the site, the men are very arrogant and it felt like they would not listen to you as a woman even if you are a union official. There were also a number of old men who are not happy with women speaking to them and it felt like they wanted a man, someone who looks like them. It felt like they would crush whatever we raise but the official was very supportive.”<sup>153</sup>

### **Learning from peer organizations**

Sharing across the organizations in the peer learning workshops has been an important sensitization process for the BCAWU change team. “Construction workers as vulnerable workers” is an often used but little explored concept. As part of the GALP, BCAWU committed itself to understand the differences in the ways that women and men in the construction sector experience vulnerability and how these differences influence the union’s recruiting and organizing strategies. By sharing in the experiences and challenges of the Equality Project and SADSAWU change teams, the BCAWU team not only developed a greater awareness of gay and lesbian and domestic workers’ conditions and rights, but also a deeper and more nuanced understanding of how different groups of people experience feeling vulnerable. This sensitization has been important in assisting the team to think more carefully about creating spaces that allow workers to tell their stories and to feel they are being listened to and supported. Women workers who have participated in the BCAWU workshops in the second half of 2012 have been encouraged to tell their stories and the discussions and recommendations emerging from the workshops have been shaped by the key themes emerging from these stories.

### **Making women visible in the union**

The national educator, Bongani, described the focus on recruiting four young women officials as part of BCAWU’s internal change process of making women more visible within the trade union. He pointed out that the idea was that this visibility could assist in recruiting more women workers into the trade union. Three of the four women were recruited into jobs with administrative roles, while the fourth was recruited to the Education Department. The four young women described their experience of being in BCAWU in some of the following ways:

- “I have a passion and I enjoy working with people and servicing the community.”
- “I was looking for work but now it is more about finding ways to help other employees.”
- “I thought that I would work at BCAWU while I was looking for another job, but now I feel that I have learned a lot about the workplace through this experience.”
- “Up ‘til now, we have had no fears of sexual harassment even if the office is a male-dominated environment and I would like to make sure that we keep this kind of environment.”
- “I would like to play more of a role in the servicing of members so that the union is not just seen as recruiting.”

As part of opening up learning spaces for the newly appointed women officials, Bongani has encouraged them to become active participants in the Decisions for Life Campaign (DFL), a project coordinated by

---

<sup>153</sup> Author Interview with Nokuphiwa Dlamini, December 2012.

the LRS and influenced methodologically by the GALP. Part of the campaign coordination work involves focusing on creating reflective and respectful spaces that allow activists to work together across ideological, organizational and personal differences and create opportunities to share "stories" and plan and evaluate in an affirming environment. Being part of the DFL space is helping reinforce the experience of participating in the GALP.

One of the younger, newly appointed BCAWU officials and change team members is part of the DFL and describes her experience: "The DFL gives me a space to help me to deal with work problems differently. I used to want to scream, but now I know that once a month, I have a place to discuss and think more carefully about what I am doing and how to take my work forward."

### **Bringing in women**

According to participants, the union has made specific gains in recruiting women. One participant reported that "in Gauteng, we have recruited 1,500 new women; in Limpopo 500; and in Mpumalanga, 300. We also now have a strong women's structure in Limpopo. We are involved in the placements of women in local companies. We are also focusing on upgrading women into different levels. We are monitoring and evaluating the relationship between men and women in the workplace."<sup>154</sup>

### **Hearing women's voices**

The mentoring workshop in August 2012 and BCAWU's joint workshop with NACTU in October 2012 became the first time women's needs became a focal point in the union. Designed and partially facilitated by Nokuphiwa Dlamini, the workshop attempted to use GALP techniques such as "check ins" that allow participants to not only introduce themselves but to also have the space to share some part of the daily experiences with fellow participants. The design also drew on storytelling as a method to encourage discussion and reflection. Both workshops have provided the change team with important guidelines for the types of issues (e.g., sexual harassment) and the kinds of supports needed to take the change project forward (e.g., workshops, discussion between women and men, workplace policy and more women on negotiating teams). Several reflections arose out of the mentoring workshops, including:

- "For women, sexual harassment is a big problem. Women speak to each other about the problem, e.g., when there is the touching of bums or the brushing of breasts. There is also a great deal of verbal harassment. We need more workshops—workshops that take place on the site so that women can have more knowledge and are able to speak out about what sexual harassment is. We also need discussions between both men and women. The workshops need to include employers, workers, officials and shop stewards. Women are afraid to speak out so there needs to be support, free spaces and discussions with people that they can trust. We need to also look at the workplace policy and the Government Code of Good Practice on sexual harassment. The CCMA is available to do workshops and workplace visits."
- "We need to negotiate for women to have access to toilets and showers, proper working clothes that will fit women's bodies."
- "We need to get more women to negotiate at a company level, to train more women as negotiators. To train more male negotiators to be more sensitive to the needs of women and to

---

<sup>154</sup> Maria Masuku at the Second Peer Learning Workshop, November 6-9, 2012.

focus on getting more issues affecting women onto the SAFSEC July 2013 round of negotiations.”

- “If women feel that their needs are being addressed and they feel a sense of job security, they are more likely to join the union.”<sup>155</sup>

### **A sense of passion and hope**

In the face of wide-scale workplace restructuring, retrenchments and a decline in the standards of working conditions, unions are faced with huge challenges. Keeping alive a sense of hope and passion to continue organizing against such enormous challenges is difficult, but in some ways the GALP has assisted the change teams to find joy and value in the work they are doing and a sense of collective solidarity that they sometimes struggle to find in their rushed and pressured lives. Sharing stories, challenges and dreams about the intertwined nature of your work and home life with a supportive group seems to help renew flagging energies and inspire creative energy.

As one member noted: “When we first met, there was no indication of the involvement of women, no visibility. Now we have a group of young women and we have our own plan, a plan that is alive and we feel very positive. We have increased the number of women officials in the head office, we have a strong and committed change team, we have a broader forum of women workers and a few male organizers committed to finding ways of taking forward gender equality. We have organizers who have committed themselves to participate in training processes that would assist with gender sensitivity, we are slowly making connections to women in different companies and lastly we have assisted in resuscitating the women’s forum in NACTU. We can be proud of ourselves.”<sup>156</sup>

### **Preparing to move forward**

The GALP has offered the team in BCAWU an opportunity to meet in one space during the peer learning processes, an opportunity that almost never happens within the union. The space has been supportive and allowed for deep and honest reflection with peers in different contexts facing similar challenges. This affirming space, where peers challenge respectfully, has assisted the team to keep some sense of hope alive and has given team members a sense of renewed internal value to the work they are doing. In the mentoring sessions between the peer learning processes, the team has begun to see the change plan not as a set of activities, but as a collective striving toward a common set of objectives with evolving activities.

Going forward, the change plan is unlikely to be a well-structured set of actions and outcomes, but the team seems prepared for this.

## **Section 4: HOSPERSA**

This section describes the history and institutional context of HOSPERSA and its participation in the GALP. It includes a description of the change project and how it operated at the personal, workplace and community levels, as well as the outcomes and emerging insights from the process.

---

<sup>155</sup> Author’s notes from August and October workshops.

<sup>156</sup> Interview with Nokuphiwa Dlamini, December 2012.

### **HOSPERSA's Context and History**

HOSPERSA, with a membership of 68,000 health workers, organizes in the public and private health care sectors, and among workers in public welfare, education and general public service. HOSPERSA's roots lie in the formation of the Hospital Public Servants Association of South Africa, formed more than 60 years ago. In 1989, the Hospital Public Servants Association of South Africa merged with the Association of Cape Provincial Hospitals to form HOSPERSA. In 1994, HOSPERSA registered as a trade union operating in all nine provinces. As part of the federation FEDUSA, HOSPERSA is non-aligned politically and is a member of the global union federation, Public Services International (PSI).

HOSPERSA has been in the forefront of occupational health and safety victories.<sup>157</sup> HOSPERSA is one of the leading members of the Independent Labor Caucus, which negotiates salary increases and better working conditions in the Public Service Coordinating Bargaining Council.

While there have been significant changes in the country's health system since 1994, the union reports it is organizing in a context of a health care system that is in shambles. Public health care facilities are understaffed and under resourced. Heavy workloads, poor pay and lack of accountable management and supervision contribute to low morale among health workers.

A significant percentage of HOSPERSA members are nurses and of these, the majority are women. Over the past few years, nurses' working conditions have deteriorated, their salaries remain low, and they often work in high-risk environments without protective equipment and with an ongoing fear of exposure to HIV/AIDS and multi-drug resistant TB. When disgruntled patients are faced with structural problems in health care, like under staffing, nurses bear the brunt of community frustrations. There is a perception that nurses should be compassionate and self-sacrificing "Florence Nightingales,"<sup>158</sup> taking care of everyone's needs in much the same way that a mother does in the home, without recognition for their labor.

Nurses' life-saving skills, expertise and professional identity are devalued. When they draw attention to unfair labor practices they are viewed as non-supportive and uncaring. In response to the increasing frustration of nurses who are HOSPERSA members, the union has formed a nurse's forum as a space for nurses to engage, to develop campaigns to take up their interests and concerns, to influence health policy, rebuild professionalism and regain community trust and respect.<sup>159</sup> HOSPERSA has been innovative in its approach to extend its campaigns beyond the wage issues and, in doing so, has taken account of the worker as a whole person. The HOSPERSA Education Department is leading a process of "regaining the dignity of the nursing profession." As part of this process, it challenges the collective bargaining agenda to place the issue of equality on the union agenda. The HOSPERSA concept paper developed for National Nurses Day in 2011 describes this challenge as follows:

"Collective bargaining agendas have seen very little thought or interest in understanding or revisiting our humanity, dignity and equality, none of which can be quantified in monetary terms. It is through

---

<sup>157</sup> For example, the union led a campaign for retractable needles, won cases for health care workers exposed to multidrug-resistant tuberculosis and negotiated for safety shoes for theater staff.

<sup>158</sup> Comment of a HOSPERSA member in Eastern Cape Lekgotla.

<sup>159</sup> "Repositioning of the Nurses Voice in HOSPERSA," HOSPERSA Education Department, March 2011.

our experiences and our manner of relating to each other that we experience a sense of dignity, equality and humanity.<sup>160</sup>

In 2008, HOSPERSA faced the threat of being deregistered by the Department of Labor after accusations of financial irregularities. For HOSPERSA members, the threat of deregistration created a great deal of uncertainty. At the end of 2010, HOSPERSA introduced the idea of an open, consultative dialogue involving HOSPERSA representatives. Drawing on the idea of a traditional community council, the union called the dialogue a “Lekgotla.” In the Sesotho language, a “kgotla” is the place where meetings are held. In the South African context, Lekgotla describes a place where people meet to engage in dialogue on topical issues. The National Lekgotla brought together worker leaders and officials from all nine provinces to discuss strengthening five areas: HIV/AIDS; gender; occupational health and safety; young workers; and nurses. In the union structure, these areas are referred to as “forums” and are charged with specific functions and programs. The union saw these forums as:

“...a living conversation, a space where everyone is able to speak without being interrupted, to speak as equals and to move toward creating consensus ... looking at new ways of building the organization and creating a culture of unionism that brings in a new perspective for the future.”<sup>161</sup>

This gathering was an attempt at “getting the voices from below” to speak about ways members would like to see the process of rebuilding the organization to move forward. The popular sentiment, as expressed by one participant:

“We felt that we knew what the national office bearers and provincial office bearers would say, but we did not know what a shop steward or worker would say. There was some element of fear. How far can you risk opening up the space? We were trying to get into the leadership’s mind. But we decided that ‘get whatever you get.’ If you get the punches, then tough! We were genuinely trying to give members a chance to dialogue.”

Through the Lekgotla process, the following priorities emerged:

- Returning humanity, dignity, equality and professionalism in the health sector.
- Closing the gap between health professionals and the community.
- Addressing the shortage of resources in public hospitals that put members at risk because they are on the receiving end.
- Working toward bringing back a quality health care system because the standard of health has deteriorated in major public hospitals.

Important internal issues were also identified, such as the need to:

- Sensitize the leadership that non-wage issues are just as important as the salary increment.
- Create a platform to educate negotiators about the monetary value of non-wage demands and why workers need to win them.
- Form a bargaining council committee which would be gender balanced.
- Work toward 50-50 representation in leadership positions.

---

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

- Ensure gender equality is a standing item in bargaining, in union meetings and in the workplace—and to do this without sounding like a broken record.

### **Why and how HOSPERSA decided to participate in the Gender Action Learning Process (GALP)**

Over the past few years, the LRS has been interested in finding, recording, and showcasing examples of trade union best practice that focus on issues of equality—especially the impact of unequal gender relations. When HOSPERSA invited the LRS to assist with facilitating its National Lekgotla at the end of 2010, LRS was intrigued by the union’s focus on “getting voices from below into a dialogue” to strengthen equality and build activism among members.

Faced with daunting challenges in the health care sector, the Lekgotla participants took an open and honest approach to critically assessing themselves as health care workers—their strengths and weaknesses, as well as the broader challenge of working in a severely under-resourced and devalued sector. Their dialogue centered around finding ways to strengthen the relationship between health care workers and the community as a means of addressing the crisis in the health care sector. The union took the Lekgotla approach into the provinces, and LRS had the privilege of observing, recording and assisting with eight provincial Lekgotlas (two provinces, Western Cape and Northern Cape, formed part of the same lekgotla). Through the open dialogue, LRS learned a great deal about the challenges facing health care workers—and we were inspired by HOSPERSA members’ commitment, energy and creativity in finding solutions.

When Gender at Work and LRS began planning for the 2012-2013 GALP, HOSPERSA seemed an ideal candidate, given its:

- Willingness to confront organizational challenges in an open and reflective manner through the innovation of the Lekgotlas.
- Focus on “strengthening the voices from below and encouraging activism.”
- Commitment to addressing the stigma of HIV among health care workers.
- Commitment to giving real value to the care-giving work of its members and to workers throughout the health sector.

When LRS approached the HOSPERSA Education Department to discuss its possible participation in the 2012-2013 GALP, HOSPERSA agreed that participation in the GALP offered the union an opportunity to address some of the issues that had emerged in the Lekgotlas.

A HOSPERSA member reflected on how the GALP was a good fit for the union: “In the Lekgotla, we discovered that there are people, including ourselves, who do not know about gender issues. Before the GALP, we agreed that the focus after the Lekgotla would be on gender, HIV and young workers. GALP came as a blessing, an answer from God. Issues like occupational health and safety seemed easier to deal with because when there are transgressions, they can be recognized and addressed. With gender, HIV and the involvement of young workers, it is clear that having (union) resolutions is not enough, as resolutions alone do not remove stigma, prejudices or discrimination.”

The HOSPERSA member continued:

“Through the Lekgotla forums, we were clear that we needed help. We had challenges on how to address gender issues—where would we start? We knew the LRS, the DFL campaign, and could see how this work was having an impact on encouraging unions to take up issues beyond wages like issues of gender

inequality. We were always struggling in provinces on the issue of how to create gender equality. We saw the Lekgotlas as a journey to learn and to explore and we saw the LRS and the GALP as assisting us to analyze what was coming out of this journey.”<sup>162</sup>

## **GALP Meetings and Process**

### **Introductory meeting**

After a series of discussions at the end of 2011, the HOSPERSA change team participated in the GALP introductory meeting on February 28. The change team was made up of two women union officials, Fazeela Fayers, assistant general secretary for education and Phumzile Mashishi, a project officer in the Education Department, and two worker leaders, one woman and one man, Ruth Weise, provincial treasurer and gender forum representative for Free State province, and Mbuso Shoji, provincial gender forum coordinator for Gauteng. As forum representatives, the two worker leaders participated in the Education Department programs and were chosen by the department to be part of the change team. The introductory meeting gave the change team an opportunity to meet change teams from the four other participating organizations, to discuss the GALP program in more detail, discuss why HOSPERSA was participating in the program and share some of their hopes and dreams of being part of the GALP.

In informal discussions during the meeting, HOSPERSA members indicated they were eager to experience the peer learning process because for most of them, this was their first experience of being in a learning environment with such a diverse group of organizations. To create a visual image of the specific challenges men and women in the organization face and how they respond to these challenges, the HOSPERSA change team used pictures from magazines to create a collage reflecting men and women’s situation as health care workers and as HOSPERSA members. The exercise gave them an opportunity to think creatively about the gender relations in the workplace and union and it helped to start a conversation about the role the GALP could play in addressing some of the organizational challenges.

### **“Hearing Our Stories” meeting**

The introductory meeting was followed by the “Hearing Our Stories” meeting on March 10-11, 2012. For this meeting, the original four-person change team also included two men, Winston Andrews, HOSPERSA vice president of Gender and HIV and Jones Mashala, a nurse and full-time shop steward; and one woman, Edna Bokaba, a project officer in the Education Department.

### **Process**

On the meeting’s first day, participants shared their insight in and experience with HOSPERSA and developed a collective picture of the past and present contexts within HOSPERSA.<sup>163</sup> Other change team members felt that much of the HOSPERSA history is unknown and that the silence can be partly attributed to embarrassment over HOSPERSA’s historical roots in the apartheid system. Almost all of the participants in the “Hearing Our Stories” meeting had some experience working in the health system during apartheid and spoke of “much better working conditions for health care workers,” even though deep racial segregation and in particular, spatial segregation, meant that many people did not have access to proper health care.

---

<sup>162</sup> Author interviews with Jones Mashala and Phumzile Mashishi, December 5, 2012.

<sup>163</sup> One of the “veterans,” Edna Bokaba, 76, had joined HOSPERSA’s predecessor, the Hospital Public Servants Association in 1973, and provided a vibrant account of a “time when nurses were respected and respected themselves as professionals.”

The advent of democracy brought the expectation that proper health care would be available to all and that health care workers would get wage parity and equitable conditions of service across the racial divide. The HOSPERSA change team spoke at length about what even the Minister of Health, Aaron Motsoaledi, has described as the “crumbling” health care system and how this has led to wide-scale demoralization among health care workers and among HOSPERSA members. As noted by one participant, health care workers “are made to feel that they are wrong to fight against the appalling conditions in the health care facilities, because by fighting for their rights, they are showing that they do not care about the well-being of the patients.”

In analyzing the context, the change team identified that challenges in the health care sector have a “woman’s face” because the focus is on the nurse as almost the only actor in the health care system and nursing is seen as women’s work. The management or doctors—the “male face”—are not viewed as part of the problem. A significant proportion of the HOSPERSA members are nurses. One participant described HOSPERSA’s organizational identity as “a mirror of what everyone demands from women in society.”

During the second day of the “Hearing Our Stories” meeting, Gender at Work facilitators Nina Benjamin and Michel Friedman participated in the 2012 National Lekgotla in Gauteng where representatives from the provincial forums met to discuss a range of resolutions emerging from the provincial Lekgotlas. This “Hearing Our Stories” process differed from our plans, and as facilitators we were drawn into assisting with an “on the spot” workshop for the Lekgotla. The evening after the Lekgotla, the change team met to assess “whether we are bringing the heart back into the body.”<sup>164</sup> The body referred to HOSPERSA as an organization with many different functions, and the heart referred to addressing the sense of demoralization and feeling of no value that health care workers experience.

At the end of the “Hearing Our Stories” meeting, change team members felt they had done a “post-mortem” of their organization and this assisted them in going deeper in understanding some of the challenges they face in “encouraging activism for creating equality.”

As one change team member said, “HOSPERSA members are battling with the dichotomy of fighting for your rights and feeling good about caring, valuing. As a union, if you are not fighting, you are seen as a weak union, but HOSPERSA is not about this kind of solution and we see fighting as the last resort. We first try negotiations and a more collaborative approach. So we are trying to build an activism that is about caring but also about protecting our rights in a profession where our work is devalued—and we are trying to do this through negotiations.”<sup>165</sup>

### **The First Peer Learning Workshop**

Two change team members, Phumzile Mashishi and Jones Mashala, took part in the First Peer Learning Workshop, April 23-26, and worked more closely with the idea of “bringing the heart back into the body.”

In the first exercise, the change team presented key events marking HOSPERSA’s historical development. This offered the change team an opportunity to again reflect on its organizational history. The exercise also enabled change team members to prepare presentations to the rest of the group, in which they described an interesting organizational story of achievements and challenges within the

---

<sup>164</sup> From a drawing of HOSPERSA as a human body (first day of hearing the stories meeting), March 10, 2012.

<sup>165</sup> Fazeela Fayers at the Hearing Our Stories meeting, March 10-11, 2012.

political-economic context of the country. The other participants knew very little about HOSPERSA or trade union organizing in the health care sector, and their questions (such as, “What made you change the sense of sisterhood you had between nurses during the time you were still an association?”) challenged the HOSPERSA change team to reflect deeply on its organizational structure, its day-to-day challenges, and the role of structure in limiting sisterhood. Ma Edna Bokabe, a long-time HOSPERSA member, replied: “We had to be political and register as a union. We were no longer an association and this change brought in strict bureaucracies, as we were no longer a social club. We had to follow a hierarchical and patriarchal structure and the emphasis moved from socializing to education about labor rights, and the pressure to grow the organization was very high. If we do not recruit enough members we lose our recognition agreement. “

The questions: “What defines a worker? Is it whether they earn a wage?” challenged the change team to think about how the union is responding to the reorganization of work in the health care sector where workers, primarily women, perform home-based care work and are not brought into the formal employment system. Home-based caregivers are often expected to perform the work without any remuneration. Ma Edna Bokabe offered a thoughtful response: “It is really tricky because according to my understanding, a worker is anyone who renders a service to the employer and then gets remunerated for her labor. However, in South Africa today, we have people who do the same service voluntarily, for example, home-based care workers, and they get a stipend and not a salary. Trade unions are aware of this practice and they need a strategy of handling this.”

During this workshop, the Gender at Work Integral Framework<sup>166</sup> was introduced and HOSPERSA analyzed the Lekgotlas using this framework. There was agreement that the focus of the union’s work in the Lekgotlas involved changing men and women’s consciousness and that through consciousness-raising the union could begin to change norms—for example, more health care workers would test for HIV and more nurses would be prepared to address the challenges they face.

When analyzing what they would like to change within the union, change team members said they want to develop a worker-driven union where workers’ voices are amplified—to create platforms through the Lekgotla and give members an opportunity to dialogue on issues affecting them and to empower the gender forum to be able to have a gender sensitive trade union. Through Lekgotlas, they will challenge formal and informal rules—leading them to create a new culture of working and relating as they dialogue with members. By training members on Occupational Health and Safety, they will teach them to demand their rights.

For the internal change, the focus was also on consciousness-raising with an assumption that dialogues would be at the heart of changing norms inside the union.

At the end of the First Peer Learning Workshop, the HOSPERSA change team identified its intent to create a union that is equitable, gender sensitive, well balanced and able to handle or treat men’s and women’s issues. The change team also made a six-to-eight month-long commitment to:

- Understand the differences between men and women and the role of cultural practices and beliefs in their lives.
- Use relevant policies, recommendations and resolutions.
- Identify issues of gender equality, gender gaps and equal pay for jobs of equal value.

---

<sup>166</sup> This framework is described in the introductory chapter.

- Explore how to use existing policies or the formulation of union policies to strengthen its consciousness raising work.

### **Mentoring process between the First and Second Peer Learning Workshops**

In the first two mentoring meetings, June 1, 2012, and June 18, 2012, the change team revisited the discussion from the First Peer Workshop. The two meetings focused on using the Gender at Work framework to map the change HOSPERSA would like to implement. This time, the change team identified a series of educational interventions to assist in raising the consciousness of the gender forum members.

As part of ensuring that these would be issues considered at the HOSPERSA National Congress in late 2013, the team also focused on gender equality and HIV policy interventions. During this time, a broader HOSPERSA change team was formed, which included two young male worker leaders, Itumeleng Nkoenyane, coordinator of the young worker forum in Limpopo and Desember Mpanzama, the youth coordinator from the Kwa Zulu Natal (KZN) province, as well as Thandi Mogkabe, union vice president for education (a woman). The change team now included representatives from five provinces: KZN, Limpopo, Western Cape, Free State and Gauteng. The broader change team consisted of four men and five women, national and provincial union leaders and national officials. Creating a broader change team enabled the union to involve worker leaders at different levels of the organization as well as from provinces beyond Gauteng, the location of the national office.

Fazeela, Phumzile and Jones participated in the third mentoring meeting, August 21, 2012, which focused on how an upcoming ILO HIV workshop involving HOSPERSA leadership could assist in initiating discussion about the different forms of discrimination that exist in the union and in the workplace and why HOSPERSA needs to take a lead in addressing non-wage issues, such as HIV prevention and sexual harassment in the workplace and union.

As part of the mentoring process, the change team analyzed the gendered nature of the “silence” among health care workers on the topic of HIV, and tried to find or create organizational spaces to help break the silence. The team believed that engaging an organization with the prestige of the ILO to facilitate a workshop on HIV and more particularly, the gendered nature of the epidemic with the national union leadership, would increase space and support for organizing around non-wage issues.

The mentoring process provided a reflective space for the change team to review its plans. In the HOSPERSA process, it has taken a while for the team to view the change project as an experiment in a “slice of the broader action” that team members are attempting to implement. It was only by the third mentoring meeting that the team started viewing the change project as an opportunity to test assumptions and actions and then reflect on the outcomes of these actions and make changes. This process was not easy, because union culture seems to focus on “quick fixes” to problems. In the day-to-day stress of dealing with a host of workplace issues, union leaders find it difficult to create time and space for reflection. After a problem is identified, an immediate solution is sought. The rushed nature of coming up with solutions leads to interpersonal tension and a sense of blaming each other when these do not work as planned. Working with the change team to identify a smaller, more manageable piece of action felt almost counter to union culture and while there was no clear resistance, the team kept slipping back into very ambitious plans: “At first, we were under the impression that we needed to

come up with a fixed, one-off plan, but it is clear that our proposed plan is a process to be implemented over 18 months and that we can reflect and change when necessary.”<sup>167</sup>

### **The Second Peer Learning Workshop**

The second peer learning workshop, held in November 2012,<sup>168</sup> provided the HOSPERSA team the opportunity to connect with the other groups after a break of six months and to “tell how far they are with the organizational change process.” The workshop was a space for both reflection and critical analysis. Two highlights emerged: the role of the ILO workshop in sensitizing the HOSPERSA leadership to the gendered nature of HIV and in providing a space to discuss and address an example of sexual harassment in the organization. The second highlight was HOSPERSA’s input into the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill.<sup>169</sup> The discussion in the workshop offered change team members the opportunity to step back and analyze why they viewed these as highlights, what kind of change they thought was happening and whether they were closer to a “HOSPERSA member that is active in the struggle for equality, gender sensitive, well balanced and able to handle or treat the different issues of men and women.” Using the Gender at Work Framework, they tracked where they saw the change happening. At the end of the Second Peer Learning Workshop, the team agreed that they would continue to focus on consciousness-raising and policy.

### **The GALP’s impact on daily union work and visible changes**

The numerous insights that have emerged so far from HOSPERSA’s participation in the GALP are summarized below.

#### **“Bringing the heart back into the body”**

Bringing the heart back into the body was an important “discovery” that emerged from the drawing exercise in the “Hearing Our Stories” meeting. For the change team, the Lekgotlas had been a space to “get the voices from below” and to bring back “humanity, dignity, equality and professionalism in the sector.” But the change team’s drawing depicting HOSPERSA as a functional “heartless” body surprised team members, and brought home to them that they were still not able to locate the “humanity,” the “voices from below.” This collective assessment of what they saw as the most important challenge also became a guide to assessing the impact of their day-to-day interventions as an Education Department.

#### **“It is becoming clear to us that education activities do not automatically lead to consciousness-raising!”<sup>170</sup>**

Within the union, the design and facilitation of educational activities are seen as key functions of the Education Department, and these functions are presumed to lead to increases in consciousness. Jones Mashala, who is responsible for coordinating occupational health and safety, felt that “if people are aware and understand why occupational health and safety is important, it will be a norm to use gloves and test for HIV/AIDS in the clinics.” As part of an ongoing conversation between the formal mentoring sessions, the Gender at Work facilitator questioned this assumption. Statistics on members willing to test for HIV remained extremely low, despite HOSPERSA members’ awareness (as health care workers) of how HIV is transmitted. Jones Mashala and Phumzile Mashishi more carefully analyzed their

---

<sup>167</sup> Phumzile Mashishi, in telephone conversation with Nina Friedman, September 2012.

<sup>168</sup> Phumzile Mashishi, Ruth Weise, Itumeleng Nkoenyane and Desember Mpanzama participated in the Second Peer Workshop, November 2012.

<sup>169</sup> The Department of Women, Children and People with Disabilities published the bill for public comment in August 2012.

<sup>170</sup> Author’s discussion with Phumzile and Jones, October 2012.

assumptions on how change would happen and they began to realize that the focus on consciousness-raising required more than education. They re-defined consciousness-raising to mean “changes in behavior that leads to action.”

This brought into sharper focus the importance of an educational process and design in which participants feel valued, respected, freely participate in discussions and learn from their peers, while recognizing that each person “has some kind of expertise”<sup>171</sup> and can feel a sense of personal transformation that energizes and inspires action. For Jones Mashala and Phumzile Mashishi, some of these elements existed in the Lekgotlas, particularly at the level of personal transformation where many participants experienced a sense of freedom to speak from the heart and were inspired to take action in their local unions. For example, worker leaders who participated in the provincial Lekgotlas initiated discussion forums and supported fellow workers who experienced discrimination because of their sexual orientation or disability. Jones Mashala and Phumzile Mashishi felt that the GALP assisted the change team to experience a more sustained process of personal transformation, one that includes developing the attitudes, skills and experience necessary to move forward the organizational transformation HOSPERSA is attempting through the Lekgotlas.

### **Addressing norms is not easy**

A recurring theme throughout the Lekgotlas was the negative attitude of the community toward health care workers and, in turn, the negative perception health care workers have of themselves. During the mentoring meetings, the change team began to articulate this negativity as a norm. One member said:

“There is a perception that healthcare workers (mostly women) don’t care anymore. Their economic life as a nurse has also changed and the work has become de-valued. We are asking ourselves if it has become a norm for health care workers not to care and for the community to view health care workers as non-caring? How are people then experiencing healthcare workers? Does this norm impact on the ability of health care workers to struggle to change their conditions? What happens to a society where people do not trust their nurses, where nurses themselves do not get tested for HIV, do not adhere to treatment and are vulnerable to gender based violence even in the workplace?”<sup>172</sup>

The process of recognizing the “norm” has been significant in the GALP planning process because it is now seen as a deep structural relation that needs to be addressed. Encouraging activism among HOSPERSA members is then directed toward impacting on this norm. Change team members are beginning to locate the many smaller activities they design, organize and facilitate as part of a process of creating consciousness that can lead to action that chips away at the norm. This has given a different significance to the day-to-day work of the union: Change team members can now see a range of union activities as opportunities for making shifts in consciousness and are, in turn, intervening in these activities so as create safe, inspiring, respectful and reflective spaces.

### **Working on policy to impact consciousness**

In the second half of 2012, the national government’s Department of Women, Children and People Living with Disabilities issued a call for public comment on the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality Bill, and HOSPERSA took up the challenge through a submission to the federation, FEDUSA.

In the Second Peer Learning Workshop, the change team identified HOSPERSA’s input into FEDUSA’s presentation on the Women Empowerment and Gender Equality (WEGE) bill as indicative of

---

<sup>171</sup> Jones presentation at the Eastern Cape Lekgotla.

<sup>172</sup> Fazeela Fayers at the June 18, 2012, mentoring meeting.

HOSPERSA's emerging activism that the change project intends to nurture. HOSPERSA project officer Phumzile Mashishi led the process, involving gender forum coordinators by phone because there were no resources to bring members together in person. The change team viewed HOSPERSA's move to develop the submission and involve a broader layer of members as a sign that the union had the confidence to look outward and engage on gender issues.

During the Second Peer Learning Workshop, the change team described how it could use the process of policy formulation on issues like creating gender equality, addressing sexual harassment and combating HIV as part of its preparation for the HOSPERSA National Congress at the end of 2013. These issues would serve as important consciousness-raising processes. The team sought to produce basic drafts of policies, and saw its work on the WEGE bill as a step in this direction. In preparation for the National Congress, the team would solicit stories and experiences from members, assist members to analyze them through introducing basic gender tools of analysis and formulate simple but clear guidelines in the policy documents. The team would do all of this in a supportive, non-judgmental way. Team members realized this would take time and resources, but they were confident their efforts would get union leadership's support because these measures would enhance the union's profile. In turn, the policy work would open spaces for connecting with broader layers of members in a way begun by the Lekgotlas. Storytelling and similar methods would encourage members to speak and could especially help give value to the experiences of women health care workers.

#### **Personal transformation and organizational change**

A sense of being valued and valuing, respect, support, energy, enthusiasm, inspiration, honesty and critical reflection are some of the values and attitudes change team members feel are part of the personal transformation they experienced through the GALP. Team members provided an honest reflection of the types of fears, discriminatory attitudes and negative relationships to power they entered the GALP process with and how, through the collective support of the other participants and facilitators in a safe space, they could challenge themselves and their peers. They do not see a separation between this personal journey of critical reflection and the organizational changes they and their fellow organizational members will drive.

For the women members of the team in particular, "speaking from the heart" feels liberating: "When you give (an) answer, it's not like you want to be right or correct. You are being honest in your response."<sup>173</sup> The GALP process encouraged speaking from the heart through workshop activities that gave value to personal experience and personal change.

Phumzile Mashishi, the gender project officer, articulated clearly how the GALP has assisted her in developing a sense of power from within. "What I have learned whilst discussing is that complaining and moaning drains your power whether you are right or not .... At the end of the day, it drains you. To move forward, you need to feel confident from inside yourself and not in relation to what others think of you."

As the project officer driving the change project, Phumzile is faced with many organizational pressures that could make it difficult for her to stay inspired and focused. She sees the change project as not only an organizational experiment about making change but also as a personal experiment in how, as a woman, she maintains shared power and not power over or power under.

---

<sup>173</sup> Phumzile Mashishi in discussion with Nina Benjamin.

Challenging one's personal attitudes and prejudices without finding external factors to hide behind is at the heart of personal transformation. The HOSPERSA change team sees how the prevailing conditions in the health system feed into the sense of despair and demoralization among health care workers. Yet it is these very health care workers who need to lead the struggle for transforming the health care system. HOSPERSA's challenge is to assist health care workers in evolving from victim to active agents for change. This involves processes of personal transformation—and so for change team members to have their own personal transformation experiences is not only inspirational, but with careful reflection, can act as a guide to assisting others.

The HOSPERSA GALP change project is focused on creating an activism among members, as well as creating activists who have a vision of a more caring and humane health care system and who are willing to challenge the structural impediments to creating such a system while critically reflecting on their own role as health care workers. For the change team, nurturing members who are able and willing to "speak from their hearts, feel free to tell their stories" is an important step toward this connected personal and institutional transformation. In the GALP process, the team sees the value of the role of the personal story and the relationship between personal and organizational change. These experiences have given the team the confidence to experiment with educational methods, such as storytelling, which had not previously been used.

### **Preparing to move forward**

Working with an experiment like the change project, in which the change team needs to respond to many unforeseen situations, requires perseverance, insight and the confidence to be flexible. The supportive environment of the mentoring spaces and the energy generated by the peer learning workshops are helping the team remain focused. With an emerging attitude that every activity offers an opportunity for change, change team members are both initiating processes, like the policy work for the National Congress, as well as responding to or intervening in more general union activities to encourage the voices from below to speak and be active. The challenge going forward will be to distill the insights and organizational changes of the past few months.

## Chapter 5

### What Can We Learn from Gender at Work's Experiences with Trade Unions?

As the preceding chapters have highlighted, Gender at Work facilitators engaged change teams from each of the four unions in a supportive process for a self-initiated, gender-equitable organizational change project in which each change team explored strategies for addressing a particular organizational challenge. From the completed and ongoing experiences of the four unions, a number of important issues and findings can be highlighted.

#### Methodology and Process:

- **The methodology of integrating gender equality goals and values into organizational culture and action was itself a core strategic element in the process of change.** In all cases, the process used feminist popular education and action learning methodologies to encourage critical analysis of assumptions about gender, gender equality, gender and organizational development and, in the case of HOSPERSA and BCWU, the dialogue of gender-based violence, HIV and women's economic empowerment. Core to the methodology was an analytical framework<sup>174</sup> which enabled the change teams to locate their efforts in relation to key areas of individual and systemic change and highlighted the need for changes in consciousness, access to resources, formal policy and culture. The Gender at Work methodology and process emphasized the need to address the taken-for-granted, all-pervasive and every day manifestations of gender power which permeate every aspect of organizational and community life, and which are embodied in how we conceive of our individual identities.

The methodology integrated *tai chi*, drawing and storytelling and seemed to subvert the male-defined environment. Tapping into the whole person enabled a relaxed and more introspective environment where participants spoke of childhoods, dreams, hopes and fears, for the first time sharing the personal—aspects of themselves not limited to their identities as productive workers. The process facilitated deep reflection on assumptions about change, further developed analytic and strategic skills and provided an embodied experience of a new way of working. The process challenged change team members to make conscious the strategies they were using and built change team members' analytical, strategizing and planning skills. Participants began to see the value of speaking honestly and reflecting on their work and personal lives. Working together as a team, listening respectfully and speaking honestly, they felt a sense of integration between themselves as people and the work of the organization. They began to feel that as a group, they could remain individuals with their specific needs, ideas and challenges—but also retain a sense of collective strength that enhances their analytical and strategic thinking.

- **The Gender at Work approach challenged the narrow purview of more mainstream gender training and gender integration efforts** which can have the perverse effect of marginalizing gender work and relegating it to the status of an “add on.” It **also intentionally countered the common union practice of transmitting ideas and information through lectures and top-down pronouncements.** The Gender at Work process opened up a different form of engagement, and

---

<sup>174</sup> See Chapter 1 for elaboration on this framework, adapted by Gender at Work from Ken Wilbur's integral framework.

facilitators had to be equipped to work in more participatory ways following feminist/Freirian popular education principles as well as action-learning reflective spaces.

- **Because the Gender at Work approach is not “one size fits all,”** facilitators were challenged to listen deeply to participants’ dominant discourses and lived realities and to find ways to engage them in relation to their lived experiences . Facilitators needed to understand where the participants and organizations were at, because this is the starting point for change processes.

Several points about the **context** within which the work is conducted are also useful to highlight.

- **Political identity and history impact the extent to which and how women’s empowerment and gender equality are taken up within a union. But in all cases, women face significant challenges to achieving their labor rights and voices, within unions and at work.** Within the COSATU-affiliated and ANC- and SACP-aligned SACCAWU, for example, class and race have historically featured prominently in understanding worker oppression, with gender viewed as a “non essential” or “secondary” contradiction. In its extreme form, this perspective considers economic struggle as the route to remedying exploitative class relations (the primary contradiction) and as automatically leading to remedying the “woman question” of unequal gender relations. There is therefore no need, in this view, to focus on gender inequality struggles as such, and in fact such a focus may be seen as taking attention and focus away from the real struggles around class.

In this context, gender activists in the union need to push hard to be heard, and they must take up battles in the realm of political ideas and as well as material reality. Within Sikhula Sonke, a very new union with its roots in a feminist NGO (Women on Farms Project) and founded upon women’s empowerment, the struggle was not to convince the union of this value but to ensure that it lives on in the structures and procedures of the organization. The roots of BCAWU, whose membership is overwhelmingly male, lie in a black consciousness ideology in which race is seen as the primary contradiction. BCAWU had not meaningfully addressed issues of gender inequality.

- **The diversity of unions that engaged in the Gender Action Learning Process speaks to the increasing awareness of—and also the ongoing resistance to—the value of actively promoting gender equality as a means to renew and re-invigorate labor struggles and increase their impact.** In SACCAWU, which was a forerunner in working for gender equality and women’s rights, and which made getting more women into the union’s leadership a key priority, the union leadership and culture remained male dominated, and women continually battled for voice and space, unable to significantly shift or shape agendas. In this context, gender activists were concerned that the established ways of working for gender equality had become entrenched. As the union was undergoing a process of organizational renewal, the national gender coordinator, together with a change team made up of worker leaders, actively sought to connect gender equality work to this process in new and strategic ways. One result was the formation of mall committees, an important innovation in the structure of the union.

As a newly formed union, Sikhula Sonke’s engagement with the Gender Action Learning Process was an integral part of its union-building. BCAWU was interested in challenging men’s sexual attitudes and behaviors and in increasing the number of women workers and women union members in a union where women made up 6 percent of members. Having established a

relationship of trust with the Labour Research Service, BCAWU leaders were open and willing to look at their own practices, to critically analyze strategies for challenging men’s attitudes and behaviors and to find innovative strategies for increasing the number of women in the union. BCAWU also was interested in engaging with the diverse group of peers in the Gender at Work/LRS Action Learning Process, and to draw from their input.

- While the particular institutional form<sup>175</sup> of organizing for gender equality determined who comprised the change team, **the change team’s success was related to whether the change team had the level of authority necessary to ensure that the change effort is taken on board by the union as a whole**, and is not marginalized within one department.

### **Key Outcomes of the Gender at Work Approach**

The change projects were developed as an experiment, a “slice of the broader action.” All four unions developed change projects that looked inward to facilitate broader change—challenging their own organizational strategies, hierarchies, attitudes and behaviors that perpetuated gender inequalities. The development of specific strategies that strengthen women workers’ capacity to address their practical needs was central to this reflection process. These strategies offered an opportunity to test out assumptions and actions and to reflect on the outcomes of these actions and make changes. In general, the change projects within the Gender Action Learning Process:

- **strengthened the gender equality discourse in the trade unions while developing women workers’ capacity to address their practical needs.** Sikhula Sonke activists, for example, were successful in improving working and living conditions, such as increasing access to toilets and electricity in the fields and farms, and in one case, establishing handicap access for disabled workers. Women leaders protected workers’ agricultural worker rights to public holidays and in some cases, increased pay for overtime work. Farm owners now face stricter eviction regulations, and the union exposed the inhuman working and living conditions to the department of labor. During the change project, the change team discovered an increase in “paid-up” membership. In BCAWU, the work to increase the visibility of women on construction sites enabled more women to get jobs and skills-training in local companies; helped upgrade jobs women hold; and extended worker bonuses to tile cleaners, who are primarily women and typically excluded from bonuses. Within HOSPERSA, the process of “getting voices from below” has created a sense of activism in which workers and shop stewards more quickly recognize discrimination and feel prepared to challenge it. SACCAWU, despite being faced with increasing retrenchments, made gains in achieving parental rights and in protecting pregnant women workers against discrimination while obtaining more benefits for them than is provided in current legislation.
- **strengthened worker voice in the unions, and forged improved leadership understanding of, and accountability to, worker concerns.** In the case of HOSPERSA, the union saw the Gender at Work/LRS Gender Action Learning Process as an opportunity to move forward work it had begun through the Lekgotlas to bring worker leaders and officials together to “build a new culture of unionism” to extend its campaigns beyond wages (taking into account the worker as a whole

---

<sup>175</sup> In the case of SACCAWU, the gender coordinators and gender structures led the change team. With Sikhula Sonke, where gender equality was an intrinsic organizational value, the union leadership made up the change team. In the case of BCAWU and HOSPERSA, where there were no gender structures, the Education Department (in the case of BCAWU), and worker leaders and officials (in the case of HOSPERSA), led the change teams.

person), and to lead a process of “regaining the dignity of the nursing profession.” Through this process, the union placed gender equality on its collective bargaining agenda. While there was some apprehension in opening up space to voices from below, the dialogue was intended to strengthen equality and build activism among members, and HOSPERSA was willing to confront organizational challenges openly and reflectively. In both Sikhula Sonke and SACCAWU, the Gender Action Learning Process helped the unions devolve power and authority to intermediary union structures (mall committees and BECs) that provided direct service to members and strengthened communication with and accountability to members. In BCAWU, there was a spillover effect of the attention to women’s health concerns, which opened space for male members to consider the negative health impacts women suffered at work, challenging the severe cultural pressure on men to deny and ignore their own health risks.

- **quickly brought out the contradictions between deeper and longer-term analyses and change, and the union culture/imperative of trying to find “quick fixes” to problems**, as well as the common union practice of developing long lists of problems, followed by long lists of solutions. In the day-to-day stress of dealing with a host of workplace issues, including providing front-line protection to workers in extremely exploitative conditions, union leaders find it difficult to create time and space for reflection. Rushed evaluations can lead to interpersonal tension and finger-pointing if processes do not turn out as planned. Working with the change team to first identify a smaller, more manageable piece of action felt almost counter to this union culture—and while there was no clear resistance, change teams kept slipping back into ambitious plans.
- **enabled each of the four unions to deepen its insights and develop new strategies for achieving gender equality**. As change teams began to sharpen their understanding of the importance of designing educational processes to enable participants to feel valued, respected, able to participate freely in discussions and remain open to learn from their peers, they began to value the importance of the recognition that each person “has some kind of expertise”<sup>176</sup> to achieve a sense of personal transformation that energizes and inspires action. The process **contributed a more nuanced idea of what to do to transform gender inequalities** as part of working-class struggle. It has generated an understanding that the key issue is not only about leadership, but also about the connection between the personal and the political and the need to bring in—and attend to—the whole person. For example, in BCAWU, key male leaders who participated in the Gender at Work/LRS process recognized that “creating gender equity” requires an ongoing process of change in organizational culture as well as personal change—and these officials now play an important role in trying to find spaces where this view can be shared with other BCAWU members.

SACCAWU gender activists refocused their emphasis on gender structures and on national and regional leadership to include mall committees, which provided a space to try out new approaches of working for gender equality. For Sikhula Sonke, the process introduced the union and its women leaders to a different way of working together, of reflecting and understanding power. It laid a foundation to make significant strides in building a second layer of mostly women leaders, and to grapple with the meaning of every day practices of power in relation to accountability, attitudes, access to resources and sharing responsibilities. For HOSPERSA, the Gender Action Learning Process engendered a deeper understanding of the challenges involved in achieving greater equality within the union. Change team members were challenged to

---

<sup>176</sup> Jones presentation at Eastern Cape Lekgotla, August 2011.

reflect deeply on HOSPERSA's organizational structure, their day-to-day challenges, and the role of structure in limiting sisterhood. The change team was challenged to think about how the union is responding to the reorganization of work in the health care sector, where mostly women workers perform unpaid home-based care and are not being brought into formal employment.

- **helped reinvigorate and re-inspire activists' personal and collective commitment.** In the face of wide-scale workplace restructuring, economic retrenchments and a decline in working conditions, keeping alive a sense of hope and passion to continue organizing against such enormous challenges is difficult. The Gender at Work/LRS process has assisted the change teams to find joy and value in their work and a sense of collective solidarity they sometimes struggle to experience in their rushed and pressured lives. Sharing stories, challenges and dreams about the intertwined nature of work and home life with a supportive group helped renew flagging energy and inspire creative action. The change projects renewed the passion and energy of change team members to work for gender equality.
- **challenged trade union silence about and complicity in gender oppression.** The trade union model is male-dominated, hierarchical, focuses on the productive identity of the worker and considers the emotional to be irrelevant. With its roots in male-defined, hierarchical power, the culture of the union does not easily take on problems such as violence against women and sexual harassment of women within the union. All change teams saw the need to develop alternative models of power and alternative structures to break the silence on these issues, and each of the four change teams addressed these issues differently, depending upon their organizational context.
- **helped participants identify and forge links between personal and organizational change, between consciousness-raising and changing harmful social norms.** Sharing personal reflections at peer learning workshops encouraged, supported and strengthened change team members' resolve to take on the challenges of organizational and personal change. Sharing across organizations also enabled participants to challenge some of their own prejudices and beliefs—and encouraged them to find ways of initiating similar processes in their unions. BCWU members who heard the experiences and challenges of the Lesbian and Gay Equality Project change team became more aware of gay and lesbian rights, while the SADSAWU change team's narrative created greater awareness of the challenges domestic workers face and expanded participants' understanding of "vulnerable worker." In another example, when HOSPERSA analyzed changes inside the union, there was agreement that the focus of the work in the Lekgotlas was to change "men and women's consciousness" and that through consciousness-raising the union could begin to change norms. As part of the mentoring process, the HOSPERSA change team continued to analyze the gendered nature of the "silence" among health care workers around their risk of exposure to HIV, and tried to find or create organizational spaces to help break this silence. Through the conversations and reflections, one SACCAWU change team member was empowered to leave an abusive husband. Another noted that she was more conscious of her own life and of her family, which was a change for her because as a trade unionist, she "looked at workers, at the collective and forgot herself and her family life." For young women workers in SACCAWU, the mall committee was a non-threatening space for cross-company discussion around similar issues—and helped forge a broader SACCAWU identity.

**Overall, the GALP experience of the four unions highlights that creating new norms takes a long time.**

The Gender Action Learning Process and the reflective spaces it offers have great potential to build women's leadership within unions—but what can be sustained depends upon what else is going on in the union at the time and on its resources for following up.

Sikhula Sonke's experience highlights challenges in this regard. Despite large numbers of active women members and women leaders, and the centrality of women's specific interests in defining the union's agenda, Sikhula Sonke still had to proactively work against and unlearn the consequences of organizational hierarchy and associated exclusions. To be more inclusive of less-skilled members, the leadership had to pay attention to the **how** of every day activities. Clearly, it takes a long time to unlearn what is entrenched and engrained in daily life.

Although the union made inroads in challenging the deep structural norm of supporting women leaders, an ongoing challenge remains: creating an emotionally supportive organization in which warm and friendly relationships co-exist with the needs and demands of making decisions in the best interests of the organization. Tensions between paid staff and elected members continue to test them.<sup>177</sup> Structural tensions between paid staff and worker leaders resulting from the leap in access to skills, resources, earning power and a non-oppressive working environment of the former farm workers who are now staff members, contributes to ongoing conflicts in the union. Further, a significant part of Sikhula Sonke resources are from external donors—creating another level of accountability, an NGO type of accountability which lies in tension with the union's aspiration for worker control. These were aspects of the "informal norms" within Sikhula Sonke that emerged as "tensions between staff and worker leaders" with staff seeing workers leaders as unreasonable and worker leaders in turn viewing staff as not completely accountable or efficient. This was something that the change project did not address directly.

The experiences of HOSPERSA and BCAWU highlight that broader systems and the values that uphold these systems need to be changed, and that these changes will clearly take time. For health workers to value themselves and the work they do—when this work is seen as women's work and is devalued and underpaid—there is need to broaden the work of the union to instill a sense of value, pride and dignity among health care workers, and this means challenging a patriarchal value system. For BCAWU, bringing women into the construction sector means challenging what is regarded as men's work.

Ensuring such systemic change requires ongoing and sustained reflection and action. It remains a methodological and cultural challenge for unions to sustain the creation of learning and reflection spaces as part of ongoing union organizational culture when the Gender Action Learning Process ends.

---

<sup>177</sup> Interviews by Michel Friedman in November and December 2012 and January 2013 with Johnny Boy (NEC treasurer), Dean van Rooy (donor), Patricia Dyata (general secretary), Sarah Claassen (president).

## Appendix 1

### Key Contextual Features of the Four Trade Unions

	SACCAWU	Sikhula Sonke	BCAWU	HOSPERSA
<b>Date of Formation</b>	1975 (as CCAWUSA)	2004	1975	Formed 1950s as a nursing association. Became a trade union in 1994.
<b>Sector</b>	Hospitality, catering, retail, service, tourism and finance	Agriculture	Construction	Public and private health care sectors; public welfare; education; and general public service
<b>Number of members</b>	107,553	3,400 (29% seasonal workers)	32,000 (fluctuating)	60,000
<b>% Women members</b>	65%	60%	6%	60%
<b>% Women in leadership</b>	35%	75%	Figures not available	Figures not available
<b>Federation</b>	COSATU	Non-aligned	NACTU	FEDUSA
<b>Political identity<sup>178</sup></b>	ANC, SACP aligned	Women's empowerment and worker control	Africanist and worker control	Non-aligned
<b>Key challenges</b>	Casual labor, short-term contracts. Gender equality work tends to be marginalized within gender structures.	Low wages, difficult working conditions, insecure employment. High rates of domestic violence and alcoholism. Farmers have nearly total control over workers' lives.	Women in low-paid and unskilled jobs, entrenched patriarchal and sexist behavior of male workers who have little regard for women.	Poor working conditions, low salaries, low morale, high risk with ongoing fears of exposure to HIV/AIDS and multi-drug resistant TB.

## Appendix 2

### Composition of Change Teams and Summary of Change Projects

	<b>SACCAWU</b>	<b>Sikhula Sonke</b>	<b>BCAWU</b>	<b>HOSPERSA</b>
<b>Duration of change project</b>	May 2005-February 2006; July 2008-October 2009	June 2008-February 2010; March 2010-December 2011	January 2012-June 2013	January 2012-June 2013
<b>Composition of change team</b>	All Women. (National Gender Coordinator and worker leaders, including the regional gender coordinator and shop stewards.)	All women (President; general secretary; NEC members.)	Initially all men. (National educator, organizer; international officer; and a worker leader.) By second workshop, 2 women + 2 men. (Intern; experienced official; national educator; and organizer.)	Men + women. (Officials and worker leaders from all provinces.)
<b>Change Project</b>	Develop women leaders in a mall committee. Develop a new union structure that enabled an alternative form of building women's grassroots leadership	Strengthen capacity of Branch Executive Committee members to deepen democracy within the organization and ensure it is member-driven and member-controlled.	Develop a strategy of recruiting women to join the union, encourage them to take leadership positions, improve workplace conditions for women and challenge the mindsets of men and women regarding women's place in construction and in the union.	Develop a worker-driven union where workers voices are amplified and empower the gender forum to help create a gender-sensitive trade union where reproductive work is valued and where the union can influence society's attitudes toward reproductive work.
<b>Key forms of organizing for gender equality</b>	Through gender structures.	Women's empowerment and women's leadership is an intrinsic value at the core of the organization.	Attempts to promote the rights of women workers in construction and to recruit more women into the construction sector and into the union; attempts to challenge men's attitudes.	Getting health care workers, government institutions and the broader society to value the care and reproductive work of health care workers.



888 16th St., N.W.  
Suite 400  
Washington, DC 20006  
[www.solidaritycenter.org](http://www.solidaritycenter.org)