

Presentation on Gender in Namibian Trade
Unions

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1. Introduction

Gender equality is a concept still being explored by many sections of Namibian society, including the trade unions. The words gender and woman are used interchangeably, it appears that gender issues are generally understood to mean “women issues”.

According to a research that was conducted by LaRRI, trade union leaderships have remained male-dominated, but there has been an improvement in the gender balance over the past few years. Most gender activities are directed at women only. The Survey further revealed very low levels of participation and representation of women in trade union activities. In 1999, only 2 out of the 8 unions affiliated to the NUNW had set up gender structures. The other affiliates have resisted the idea because they do not have the necessary funds to run and sustain the structures and their programmes. Most of the NUNW affiliates have no record of their sex members, thus it is impossible to determine precisely how many members in the different unions are women

2. Findings from LaRRI's report and updates

- Gender in the NUNW

The NUNW has a draft gender policy which has yet to be adopted by the federations national congress. According to the NUNW, around 40% of the unions' overall membership are women, but occupy only 29% of the NUNW's elected leadership posts. The NUNW has decided that women should be represented at international and national meetings and wants to ensure that women comprise at least 40% of all delegations to such meetings. A decision was taken that all NUNW affiliates should have gender structures in place to see to the integration of gender issues into all union activities.

3. Gender in industrial unions

- NAFAU (The Namibia Food and Allied Workers union)

NAFAU recruits workers in a wide range of industries: from hotels, restaurants, distillers and breweries to the retail and fishing industries. NAFAU has a gender policy based on its constitutional stipulation of non-discrimination on the basis of sex. The policy requires that each branch office to appoint a gender co-ordinator. At the moment, NAFAU has a membership of approximately 12500, with women constituting 65% and males 35% of the members.

- NANTU (Namibia National Teachers Union)

NANTU recruits workers in the education sector, targeting teachers and education officers. NANTU has a gender co-ordinate on each committee

throughout its structures, and all the gender co-ordinators are women. NANTU has a gender policy and a gender structure in place. NANTU's current membership figure stands at 9226, with more women (5628) than males (3598). There are more women (60.6%) teaching in Namibia than men, and women constitute the majority of NANTU's membership. Despite this, women are not proportionally represented in NANTU's decision-making structures.

- Gender in MUN (Mineworkers Union of Namibia)

The mining and energy sectors are male dominated, with men constituting over 90% of these sectors combined work force. Women are employed in support services in the mining sector and make up 1-2% of the MUN's membership. Women do not participate in union activities. MUN does not have a gender policy but it does have four gender co-ordinators who are in the process of setting up gender communities. Women hardly feature in the MUN's decision-making structures although the MUN president is a woman.

- Gender in NATAU (Namibia Transport and Allied Workers Union)

NATAU recruits mainly in the transport sector. Transport is another male-dominated sector. Over 80% of its employees are men and only few women are union members. The union has neither a gender policy nor a gender structure in place.

- Gender in NAFWU (Namibia Farmworkers Union)

Most formally employed farm workers are men, although women are also employed on farms as domestic workers and labourers. Most NAFWU's members are men and consequently most of the union leaders are men. NAFWU has neither a gender policy or gender structures in place. It does not have any concrete plans to deal with gender issues. The General – secretary could not give a figure of the total number of members due to the fact that they are busy with loading the information on the computers. Once this is done, NAFWU will have one of the most reliable membership recording system.

- Gender in NAPWU (Namibia Public Workers Union)

Although the union does not have a gender policy, it seems to be committed to gender issues. For example, it adopted a principle that if the chairperson of a structure is a man, then the deputy must be a woman.

Currently, NAPWU estimates that it has about 12 7000 women members who occupy similar occupations as men but who are under-represented in decision making structures at the workplace.

NAPWU has reported that women are increasingly participating in union activities and that most NAPWU meetings are gender balanced. NAPWU

supports government 's national gender policy and plays its part in ensuring that they are implemented at the workplace.

- Gender in MANWU (Metal and Allied Namibian Workers Union)
MANWU recruits in the metal and construction industries, as well as in businesses such as petrol stations, furniture shops and taxidermists. MANWU 's gender policy is in the process and has a gender structure in place. MANWU has a membership of 2343 of which 1543 are males and only 800 females.

3. The NUNW's Draft Women Policy Paper

The NUNW leadership has shown concern due to the fact that women do not participate in union activities and has identified a need for concrete action to promote their participation. A decision was taken that all NUNW affiliates should have gender structures in place to see to the integration of gender issues into all union activities. Through its continued commitment to gender issues, the NUNW set up a women's desk responsible for co-ordinating women issues and for setting up women's committees in all regions. This initiative died out when the ICFTU project came to an end. Many of the women activities were cancelled due to lack of funding. Currently the FES is the only organization supporting gender training.

The basic aims and objectives of the NUNW's draft women policy are:

- To promote women participation in trade union activities through women structures in all unions and through policies that integrate women's concerns into trade union policies, as well as through programmes for empowerment of women.
- To promote education and training of women through co-operation with government and NGOs in the implementation of literacy programmes through access for women to vocational training and through specific union education programmes for women.
- To assist the recruitment of women workers by introducing women to the concept of trade unions.
- To embark on programmes aimed at empowering women such as developing women leadership and ensuring equal participation of women in union structures.

4. The paper identifies the following obstacles to women's participation in trade unions

- Lack of child-care facilities.
- Restraints imposed by husbands and boyfriends
- Women's lack of confidence in their own abilities.
- Apathy in relation to union activities, cultural convictions.

- Women's lack of confidence as a hindrance to their access to power in the unions.
- Lack of funding to sustain gender activities In trade unions
- Low representation of women in other trade unions due to organizations being dominated by males. This is based on the perceptions that women and men are suited for certain kind of jobs.
- Time consuming domestic responsibilities
- Lack of support from the veterans, limited opportunities for participation due to in fights
- Lack of support and unwillingness to share power due to cultural practices
- Incompetent leadership. This leads to confusion in management and communication and lack of confidence for those who want to be empowered.

5. Recommendations

- NUNW should require all its affiliates to put in place gender structures and policies.
- Increase campaign on gender sensitization within unions by ensuring a budget for gender training.
- Encourage unions to make it a priority to have databases of all members registered.
- Introduce education programmes that will empower both males and females.
- Incorporate gender related issue in school curriculums so that it can be learnt in schools.
- Change in attitudes through gender mainstreaming
- Supporting each other through exposure to advocacy and lobbying skills
- Encourage men to become more proactive in initiatives for women empowerment.

6. Conclusion

LaRRI has recognised gender in trade unions as one of the areas which need attention. Thus more work will be done to encourage unionists to tackle the issue of gender inequality through education and workshops. The fact that NUNW as an umbrella body of 9 industrial unions has taken initiative to embrace gender equality is in itself indication that trade unions are moving towards tackling gender issues. The issue of gender inequality can be addressed by starting at the grassroots level through education programmes. The teachers union, NANTU for example, should educate its members to start teaching young learners about gender issues from an early age. This will help learners of both sexes to know and become aware of gender issues, so that they can become sensitive and supportive of gender equality.