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South Africa

New labour federation and the gender question

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In April 2017 we saw the launch of the South African Federation of Trade Unions (Saftu). At inception, it became the second largest federation in South Africa, with 24 affiliates and about 700 000 members. Some people have seen the emergence of this new federation as signaling a new dawn for worker representation, control and democracy. Others have seen it as presenting a new political praxis, reaching out to informal workers and the vulnerable, unorganised workers who constitute 76% of the total workforce. In the words of its first general secretary, Zwelinzima Vavi, it is a “broad labour front” which takes seriously outsourced workers, those in the informal sector, the unemployed and students. It even goes as far as accommodating pensioners and retirees.

Saftu is marked by its refusal to endorse or align itself with any political party. Some have called it a militant alternative to Cosatu. The federation itself claims to be “democratic, worker-controlled, militant, socialist-oriented, internationalist, pan-Africanist from a Marxist perspective and inspired by the principles of Marxism-Leninism”.

Since there is no mention of a feminist or womanist perspective, one is left to wonder about their gender politics. How different will its gender politics be from Cosatu’s? Will it resemble and reproduce Cosatu’s gender stance? Or will it reject it, take seriously womxn [2] workers and appreciate the ways in which workplace struggles are gendered? It is, after all, many of the same people who once led the unapologetically macho Cosatu that are now leading Saftu. While I appreciate that it is too early to tell, there are some concerning signs from the vision and recent events.

Representation

We’ve seen already who the key and influential leaders in the new federation are. At its inaugural congress in April, [Ground Up](#) reported that the crowds and voting delegates were largely male. Not one of the speakers in the three-day congress was a womxn. Out of five people who ran the congress’ proceedings, only one was a womxn. It is therefore not surprising that at the end of the congress only two womxn were elected to be part of the federation’s six-member executive.

Political and economic issues

Saftu leaders argue that they will not be locked in the same (shopfloor) logic as traditional trade unions who only focus on wage issues and conditions of work. They will embrace multiple struggles confronting the working class and the “poor”. This is evident in the campaigns outlined in Saftu’s [declaration](#), and its recruitment and organising strategies. While attempting to address a broad number of issues, it is concerning that their priorities and strategies see their constituency as gender neutral at best, or masculine at worst.

For womxn, the personal is political. This assertion challenges the narrow “political” framework within which most union federations work. The challenges womxn experience in their daily “personal” lives are the result of systematic gendered oppressions and massive structural inequalities. To embrace and champion a broad number of struggles, Saftu will have to take seriously the “personal” that is political for womxn workers.

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Core campaigns

While Saftu’s campaigns speak to crucial issues affecting the working class and the poor, none of them explicitly surface the gendered character of these struggles.

Take their demands for a moratorium on farm evictions, better houses and food security for farm dwellers (who produce the country’s food). They talk about “farmworkers” as if farmworkers experience farm injustices in similar ways. Farm workers have, time and again, emphasized that womxn farmworkers are worse off than their male counterparts. They are the most vulnerable and precarious; they are the first to be laid off, first to have working hours and wages decreased, and to be evicted. This is because farm owners, like their peers in other industries, find it easy to exploit and lay off womxn without any major consequences.

To champion campaigns that will address the struggles of farm workers without an appreciation of how these struggles are gendered is to be ignorant or insensitive to their actual circumstances. The new federation has very thoughtfully put forward land restoration to the landless black majority as one of its key focal areas. But we know that if the gender question is not dealt with, land will only be restored to men, leaving womxn landless, especially single mothers who are often in precarious employment.

Lessons from the new student movement

Judging by these basic, yet very telling signs, Saftu has either brushed off the gender question or thinks it can deal with it later. If that is indeed the case, it needs to learn a thing or two from the “new” student movements. To neglect gender or downplay its importance is to set the stage for your own failure. For Saftu, this could mean failing to attract womxn students who will be joining the workforce in the next few years. It could also make existing womxn workers wary of joining Saftu unions.

What then, might they do differently to avoid the Cosatu trap?

It is vital to remember that feminism is not only for womxn. It is for all people and organisations that see and equally value everyone. It is the belief in the social, economic and political equality of peoples.

Saftu prides itself on being a democratic socialist-oriented internationalist organisation. It must be all of these in ways that embrace all womxn. In other words, it must be unambiguously and explicitly feminist in its approach, including its programmes, its key priorities and its ways of organising. Saftu must take seriously the gender gaps that currently exist within its membership and build into its strategies ways of addressing them. It must also think about having separate feminist structures with power and influence within the broader federation, not the Cosatu model of peripheral, non-constitutional gender structures. As part of movement building and through these structures Saftu must, alongside the regular political economy education, push feminist political education for all its members.

It is the steadfast and archaic commitment to the “triple oppression” model that has held back progressive movements from thinking creatively about gender, along with either ignorance or rejection of an intersectional model of understanding oppression. If Saftu is to respond to the current moment, where its constituents are negotiating multiple socio-economic crises, it has to think differently about oppression. It must accept and strive to operate within an intersectional framework. Intersectionality is not a “fad” as some have argued. It is a productive way of analysing oppression by mapping the margins. If Saftu is serious about feminism, resource allocation should communicate that seriousness and the budget must reflect that struggles are gendered.

Not only are unions boys-clubs, but they are incredibly unsafe spaces for womxn. Just like in workplaces, inside the unions womxn are sexually harassed and told not to be “difficult” but to “appreciate” advances from men. They are objectified and sexualised. This translates into the kind of work they are expected to do for their unions; flowery work that showcases and values femininity and reinforces the sexist ideology of womxn’s domesticity. The price they are often forced to pay for speaking up and calling out sexism and harassment by male unionists and union members is very high.

Saftu must deliberately inculcate a different culture, one that takes sexism seriously and abhors and acts decisively against those who sexually harass womxn. It must not be a space of further victimisation for womxn and safety for perpetrators. If the federation wants to protect and represent workers equally, Saftu, together with all its affiliates, must ensure that they are safe spaces for womxn workers, that they are against class exploitation, xenophobia, racism and sexism, but also homophobia in workplaces and in communities.

Gender will mark the dawn

The gender question, therefore, has to be addressed differently and creatively if womxn workers are to be fully serviced and better represented than they were under the old Cosatu vanguard. Without a deliberate effort, the new federation risks reproducing the gender ills of its predecessor and will not necessarily mark a new dawn for womxn workers.

If the new federation does not properly and seriously engage with the question of gender (in all its diversity), womxn are going to continue to bear the brunt of class exploitation. If Saftu leaders are envisioning a “[fundamentally different workers’ organisation](#)” and they want to build a true “shield” for workers, they must not only rethink how they do politics. They must also rethink how the ways in which they do politics can be informed by progressive gender politics. In other words, they have to recognise that the current crises are not only “political, economic and social” but that they are so in gendered ways.

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[Amandla-Â»<http://aidc.org.za/new-labour-federation-gender-question/>

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[1] This is an edited and extended version of an article published in Business Day

[2] I'm using womxn in a broader sense to include people who identify as cis, queer and trans.