

**WOMEN (COUNTERPARTS) IN SOUTH AFRICAN INDUSTRY
AN ADDRESS TO THE UNIVERSITY OF THE NORTH
GENDER STUDIES
WOMEN'S WEEK: 3 MARCH 1992**

1. OVERVIEW

This brief address on women in South African Industry is predicated on both the topic and the setting of the discourse; ie. what happens in commerce and industry on the one hand and the concern by people at this academic institution with this all-important issue.

The role of the university in particular, the role of an academic institution grounded in the community is an important one. The university as a centre of learning, inquiry and discourse, has a responsibility to shape and focus debate on crucial issues of the day. It has to be the critical voice of our national intellect. As a breeding ground for ideas the university ought to grapple with ideas, not for ideas' sake, but for the betterment of our society. The university ought to monitor trends and stay at the cutting edge of developing the values of society as change unfolds.

The condition of women in industry covaries with race. Most white women could be described as middle class. A good number of them are housewives with well-off working husbands. Some have made it into traditionally made professions or occupations such as business management.

Amongst African women there is a much smaller, but growing middle class with middle class occupations. However, the vast majority of African women are working class, struggling to eke out an existence in economic activities which fall outside of the mainstream economy. Black working class women are in the lowest-paid unskilled occupations, both in traditionally female industries in the cities such as textile, garment, footwear, food-processing and domestic work, and also in rurally-based industries which are not necessarily traditional female industries at all, such as saw mills, capitalist or commercial agriculture, and all types of industries (metal, plastic, furniture, etc) situated in the so-called de-regulated border and homeland industrial areas.

2. THE DEBATE

The issue of women and their condition in society has spanned centuries. Attendant dimensions range from human and political rights through economic rights, personal self-determination, the right to work, etc. The plight of women, serious as it obviously is, tends to be diffused by the fact of being virtually completely absorbed into the mainstream political and economic struggles which are themselves male-dominated. The integration makes any attempt on the part of women to break out of traditional arrangements particularly challenging.

The core issues in the debate on women are to do with overt and subtle manifestations of discrimination on sexual grounds. The issues are that women are:

1. *despised as human beings*

2. *under-rated and overlooked as a potential employment pool*
3. *shunned or even mocked as leaders.*

Black women in particular bear the worst brunt of being discriminated against racially, berated in terms of gender, and at times, subjugated and dominated by their black male counterparts.

Discrimination against women in the workplace come in various guises. Four kinds are worthy of note:

2.1 Four Kinds of Gender Discrimination

2.2.1 Overt/premeditated

This form of gender discrimination needs little description. It is manifested in open acts of hostility, disparagement, paternalism, ridicule, segregation and the like. This is the easiest form of discrimination for business to deal with. Once rules are established to eliminate discrimination and have been clearly communicated, violators can be controlled by disciplinary actions.

2.2.2 Malicious compliance

More difficult to deal with than overt discrimination, this kind of discrimination takes the form of the “work to rules” action found in some labour union disputes with management. One indulging in this form of gender discrimination will follow all the rules laid down by management, say all the “correct” words, engage in the “right” activities and go through all the motions expected by management. Surreptitiously, however, this person will take every safe opportunity to sabotage efforts leading toward equal opportunity. A more drastic example might involve a promotion of a woman in a great show of support, but engineer the failure of the individual being used as a pawn in this game. The engineered failure will seldom manifest any overt action, but will be cloaked in activities that withhold support, training, fair task assignment, etc.

2.2.3 Ignorance

Ignorance in this context is not meant to be pejorative, but simply the absence of knowledge. People are the products of their environment and to believe that people do not have certain prejudices would be naive. Gender prejudice can be connoted if not denoted by innocent actions such as the choice of words, body language, work assignments, assumptions regarding intelligence levels, education, work ethic and the like. This form of gender prejudice (or what appears to be prejudice) is extremely difficult to manage in a business environment. After generations of dealing with women in certain ways it is almost impossible to eliminate actions that seem to represent gender prejudice.

2.2.4 Prima facie or evidential

This is the most difficult kind of prejudice to explain. One must work at understanding what it is and what effect it has on people from disadvantaged groups. To get a picture of this kind of prejudice, one must look at a large set of data at once. For example, if one were to look at hiring and promotion percentages, job appraisal skews, pay scales, representation in recognition/award schemes, job assignments, training provided, attrition and even such things as prestigious business trips and found a variance between male and female there would be prima facie (or evidential) reason for believing gender prejudice exists.

But, not necessarily so. When viewed in this macrosense, and with disparity among the genders, a rational conclusion would be prejudice, and the effect on attitudes of disadvantaged people can be devastating. A business interested in eliminating gender prejudice and promoting good gender relations is duty bound to track this kind of data and take the corrective action when the disparity is not based on facts that can be substantiated within the realm of equity.

3. GENDER DISCRIMINATION IN BUSINESS LEADERSHIP

Granting that women constitute over fifty per centum of the population, cases of prima facie discrimination against leadership positions abound. I shall cite a few leadership organisations in the corporate arena where this is blatantly manifest

The Institute of Directors: Out of a total membership of 1500, only 75 are female, and only 3 of the latter are black women.

The Corporate Forum - an association of captains of industry - female captains conspicuous by their absence.

SACOB and the AHI even shy away from discussing the issue of female members - the level of female presentation is embarrassing.

Sample of Boards of Directors of major corporations which I serve, 8: no female director.

University of the North Council : Not a single female councilor.

4. ANY TRAIL BLAZERS?

Very few and far between. Those heading up business founded by themselves or their parents eg. Veronica Devine of Justine Cosmetics; Elizabeth Bradly, leading Toyota SA's Holding Company. A few black women ex University of the North: Mabel Rantlha at SAB, Thelma Ngcobo at JCI, Sybil Matlou (Nee Sekgothe at BMW). Women can do it but odds are stacked against them.

5. WHAT CAN BE DONE TO NORMALISE THE SITUATION

There is a great deal of discussion in various organisations in South Africa today trying to identify what is the correct step to take which will ensure women emancipation. The discussions seem somewhat futile since no single isolated initiative is likely to yield much success. What is needed is a multi-pronged onslaught affecting all areas of life. This must first and foremost be aimed at ending patriarchal domination. It must also seek to change women's position i.e. the occupational division of labour, and incorporate both strategic and practical gender interests. All initiatives taken with these aims in mind, have to be encouraged, developed and coordinated for optimal effectiveness.

No stone should be left unturned in our quest for the optimal utilization of our human resources, over half of which is female. The following avenues should be used to the fullest:

The New Constitution: As we are currently discussing the question of a new constitution at all levels of organization, we need to ensure that this constitution should fully address equal rights for women as well as equal access to opportunities.

Laws: Aside from the BILL OF RIGHTS, all other subsidiary laws need to be gender sensitive.

Academic Institutions are duty-bound to raise and debate the issue; but more importantly to come up with workable strategies to practically address the challenge.

Women's organisations should strive to form alliances across a broad spectrum of formations with a commonality of purpose. The following organizations whose central thrust is women's emancipation and gender equality come to mind: the various housewives leagues, the various women's trade union groups (both within COSATU and NACTU), the Women's Leagues within political parties and movements, the Executive Women's Forum and so on. Aligning and coordinating forces among these groupings would go a long way in optimising your impact.

6. CONCLUSION

In concluding I can do no better than quote a leading black American thinker, Frederick Douglas, on self-determination:

"Our destiny is largely in our hands. If we find we shall have to seek. If we succeed in the race of life it must be by our own energies and our exertions. Others may clear the road, but we must go forward, or be left behind in the race of life.

If we remain poor and dependent, the riches of other men will not avail us. If we are ignorant, the intelligence of other men will do but little for us.

If we are foolish, the wisdom of other men will not guide us. If we are wasteful of money, the economy of other men will only make our destitution the more disgraceful and hurtful."

As a group then you are faced with a three dimensional challenge: Self-determination, self-deployment and self-development. Ensure that the requisite sound leadership to provide the trust and foster alignment in pursuit of your set goals is in place.

As we move to what is ostensibly a new era of opportunity, you must be critical of your noisy assertion of equality with men. Women should not be content with theoretical equality, but should strive to realize empirical equality. Despite the seemingly insurmountable barriers to accomplishment, women have to persevere; understanding however, that equality of condition between the sexes necessitates real equality of opportunity.