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5-9 DECEMBER
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**REPORT OF
THE ZIDS SEMINAR ON:**

**THE TRAINING AND RESEARCH NEEDS
OF TRADE UNIONS IN ZIMBABWE**

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Problems of Women Participation in Unions

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The study of African trade unionism is much more than a survey of industrial organization. It is a study of African societies, the course of their different struggles against imperial rule and the consequences for the pattern of political and economic power. In some states the trade unions contribute a major element of established authority, gathering the energies and loyalties of labour for the promotion of government policies; in others, they comprise the command of resistance, exciting, representing and directing opposition in the absence of any other effective political force but the party in power; in others, they concern themselves overwhelmingly with promoting the interests of their members, on the pattern of collective bargaining. They appear sometimes as a force for fundamental change; sometimes as a force against it; sometimes, as cut off from the main flow of social effort, a tributary trickling away into the ground.

The claim of the trade unions in Africa, and Zimbabwe in particular, to speak significantly for female labour must itself be examined.

This paper does not lay claim to a complete or comprehensive understanding of the problem of Women Participation in Trade Unions. It simply is an attempt to analyse the mechanisms perpetuating the subordination of women in society and some of the social problems posing obstacles to women's participation in trade unions and development within the large society.

There are many important reasons why we should address ourselves to the role women play in the trade unions. The year 1975 was proclaimed the International Women's Year, a landmark call for action to men and women everywhere. It was time, said the United Nations, to end worldwide discrimination against half of the human race - women. They represent millions of workers, whose efforts produce one-third of the world's income. They develop the economy and culture, run households and rear children. Women participate in virtually every aspect of society - this is indicative of our time. They are an important factor in determining progress; a substantial force whose demands cannot be ignored. The World Plan of Action adopted at the United Nations International Women's Year Conference in Mexico City in June 1975 persuaded many national governments to take legal actions towards extending women's rights especially in the labour field.

The important economic demands that trade unions and leading women's organizations consistently bring up reveal the wider involvement of women in social production and the growth of their economic activity. No scholar or politician would deny today the progressive character and significance of employed women in achieving better living conditions and true equality with men in key social positions.

The question that arises in this regard is: why then are women still so unequal in many respects? A further related question would be: why if women's rights mean human rights and fundamental freedoms, do we still have two sexes that are unequal in practice and (at times) before the law? To elaborate the point more explicitly, let us examine problem areas - like trade unions - that seem to confirm these serious assertions - bearing in mind, of course, that it is one thing to change the law and another to change traditions and attitudes. Though labour has been linked to the economic development of our country and, sadly for women, their participation in this respect is and has always been limited. Notable among the factors that have militated against women's participation in the economic development and trade unions of Zimbabwe are the following:

- The deliberate neglect of girls' education in the past by parents in preference to boys;

- The general misguided view that men, being breadwinners, should have the first chance to get employment before a woman is considered;
- Negative and reactionary attitudes towards working women and potential women employers when men perceive such women as rivals and a threat;
- Limited promotion prospects for women;
- Reactionary and fundamentalist cultural convictions which do not consider it proper for a woman to be in a position of authority over men; and
- Lack of confidence on the part of women.

This does not in any way mean that women in Zimbabwe have been idle. On the contrary, Zimbabwean women like any other women elsewhere work, they have always worked, and they need work. There is unfortunately a tendency to regard those women not engaged in gainful employment as non-working housewives. Women cook and wash and clean all their lives and look after children for a good part of it. Women are deeply involved in agriculture and in actual fact make most of the labour contribution in the process of agricultural production. This process also has its own problems.

Due to male migration to towns, increasing numbers of women have assumed traditionally male tasks, like ploughing. Other problems include lack of adequate simple tools and basic technology which aggravates women's agricultural work, lack of transport facilities and the additional burden of cattle-herding, previously done by men and children, brought about by the commendable introduction of free primary education and rural secondary schools formerly called "upper tops".

Women in rural areas thus have over-extended working days during which they spend a lot of time and energy on time-consuming but unproductive tasks. Despite all the constraints, 66 percent of all Zimbabwean women are engaged in agriculture. There can hardly be any argument over the fact that chronic overwork, such as our women face, has very damaging consequences, both for women themselves, and for society as a whole. However, in urban areas, a large proportion of women are involved in many income-generating activities in the informal sector. This was brought about mainly by the limited economic opportunities in urban and rural areas. Women participation in the informal sector, although still on a comparatively small scale, serves to give a sense of purpose and usefulness for the women who, because of lack of education and economic opportunities, are disadvantaged. Besides affording self-employment opportunities and a sense of independence, the informal sector also has the added attraction of enabling a woman to combine her income-generating activities with her household tasks.

Lack of markets for the products produced, lack of skills and capital constitute some of the problems women face in this sector.

It is clear, therefore, that women's participation in labour and the economic development of the country, be it in the formal or informal sector, is fraught with problems and frustrations. What, then, should be done to eliminate these problems, and who can do it? An ideal answer would be simply - the women themselves, with the co-operation of the planners, the decision-makers and the employers, etc. One effective way of doing it would be to join trade unions in this country. Women being part of the labour force, it follows that their role is to participate fully alongside other workers.

Women must therefore join in the struggle of the working class and trade unions against the encroachment of capitalist forces, exploitation and reaction and pursue democracy and peace. This is the only way to achieve their goals which include benefits such as:

- the right to work, guaranteed employment;
- the right to education, professional training and promotion;
- legal provisions for equal pay for equal work, improvement of working conditions and better working hours;
- implementation of constructive family policies, legal protection of maternity rights, provisions for building a network of health care institutions for mothers and children;
- constitutional guarantees to freely participate in trade unions.

All these requirements have been formulated in detail in the Charter of Economic, Social, Cultural and Union Rights for the Working Women and approved at the Fourth World Trade Union Convention in Nicosia. Delegates to that representative convention testified that the Charter expresses the most vital interests of working women today, that it specifies the general goals of the women's movement for economic equality as well as the appropriate course of union action to achieve these goals.

However, the reality of the situation in Zimbabwe today is that very few women are participating alongside other male workers at the various structural levels of trade unions. Their membership is abysmally low. It is only appropriate to ask ourselves at such a seminar, why this is so and devise strategies to change this unhealthy situation. For the purposes of today, I shall confine myself to two broad questions: *Why are women marginally if not negligibly involved in trade unions in Zimbabwe? Secondly, what are the strategies for mobilizing women to participate in Trade Unions at the various levels of operation?* Let it be on record that women in Zimbabwe are most gratified to note, for example, that the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions is very conscious of the need to encourage women participation in trade unions. Though many women may not know much about trade unions, they have faith in them and have always perceived them as a righteous force that seeks to uphold the rules of honest working relationships and fundamental human rights; a force against exploitation of one class by another. Trade unions have, therefore, a definite task - that is to struggle for the economic interests of all members of the working class. It falls on the trade unions in this country to encourage more women to do likewise. Within their workers' unions, women should be encouraged to aspire to senior and decision-making positions. It is through doing this that women's problems, interests and rights on the labour market can be easily monitored. In this regard, women have to fight their own battles, and it is up to them to convince society as a whole that "what men can do, women can also do equally well if not better". Through active participation in trade unions, women can do a lot to ease the lot of other workers and improve their conditions of service.

Though women work very hard, most of their work consists of supplying the basic survival needs of the nation. These needs include child bearing and rearing to perpetuate the nation and human labour force, the production and preparation of food for family consumption, and the general upkeep of home, clothing and household utensils. Women are on duty daily for an average of 20 hours; things like working hours, off-duty, leave, etc., are unknown in the women's busy world; busy giving free support to the present and future labour force and yet in the economists' language this is inactivity. Trade unions, to us women, seem to preoccupy themselves with the conditions of the *paid* labour force.

The plight of the unpaid workers, the majority of whom are women, lies outside the interest of trade unions. Consider the following: what about women who have made it to the paid labour market and what are some of the constraints to their full participation? The women who hold paid jobs are definitely over-worked. They work on the paid jobs and after that they carry out the unpaid work at home, without much help from men who are unwilling to do housework and find pleasure in indulging in excessive beer consumption on a daily basis.

Is it any wonder then that a working woman who is a mother and wife may find it very difficult to become an active member of a trade union? Until men are enlightened enough to do their share of the unpaid but basic survival services, it would be unfair to say women cannot be bothered to be actively involved in trade unionism. Trade unions could help by educating these men. Men workers should welcome women workers in unions so that the labour force's clout is not weakened by division when women attempt to enter the formal labour market.

Another area worth exploring, in our situation, is the extent to which seminars such as this one really achieve their objectives. In some countries, it seems that such seminars have made it possible for a relatively few people to make a wider impact. Yet in others, individuals who have come to such seminars have gone back to their places only to disappear without trace. In this context, it has been argued that the best way for women's programmes to make an impact is to organize local seminars on Women and Trade Unions. In other situations, people have used a quota system, thereby ensuring that women are afforded an opportunity to attend such seminars. Thus a need arises to have a clear policy for the trade union movement with regard to the organization and education of women.

In addition, the trade union movement needs to take deliberate measures to encourage women members to be elected to positions of authority. For example, the trade union leadership needs to take all necessary steps to ensure that, when there are elections or nominations at any level, the list of candidates and the posts to be filled reflect the membership structure of the organization. Further, when trade unions are invited to nominate representatives in consultative and decision-making bodies, women trade unionists must also be represented. The systematic use of the skills of training women members for tasks, other than women's problems or social action, is very important. Given the constraints which women face in male-dominated trade unions, we should not feel discouraged if progress seems slow. This should be regarded as a challenge which should spur us all to greater effort. The Ministry of Community Development and Women's Affairs is anxious that trade unions and other leading institutions in this country should collaborate towards the achievement of this noble goal. Society has everything to gain from the advancement of women because women as mothers of the nation will naturally spread the benefits through all their children. What little participation Zimbabwe women have in the economic development of our country must be multiplied through the removal of the constraints and barriers that women face. The truth of the statement "the national economy loses large resources if women are not involved in work" can hardly be overemphasized.

In conclusion and to recap, the following areas call for urgent research so that Zimbabwe ensures each able-bodied woman a guaranteed job according to her abilities, with equal pay for equal work, and with working conditions that are safe for her physical make-up and maternity needs.

The following issues should be invariably researched on and introduced in our legislation on women's rights:

- The consistent facilitation of better working conditions for women;
- Increased labour protection for pregnant women, nursing mothers and women with children under one year of age, and shorter working hours for that period of time;
- The introduction of and constant increase of social maternity relief through allowances, privileges in pension receipts, a wider network of maternity and child welfare institutions;
- Comprehensive legal protection of women's equality in all spheres of social life, systematic supervision and control by the State and trade unions of the observance of legislation on women's rights and on special protection of their labour; and
- The abolition of taxation of women's salary on the basis of her husband's salary scale.



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