What does a woman do when her husband is away from home and is not expected to return for a long time? Let us say, for argument’s sake, that his absence will be generally regarded as a social necessity, be it on a mission as in times of war or for economic reasons as in the case of migrant workers in South Africa who leave their families behind to seek employment in the big cities. Does she continue to perform her duties as a wife and mother, kindling the fires of the homestead on behalf of the father? Will she remain faithful to him? Throughout the ages, and not only in Western societies, men have prized the constancy of an exceptional wife and have sung the praises of her sufferings and tribulations. This account we find in Homer’s *Odyssey* as well as in a beautiful poem by JJR Jolobe, ‘*Umzalikazi*’ (‘The Mother’),

Do not cry, my baby  
Your mother suffers other miseries,  
Do not hurt her heart  
She cannot be happy without you  
Wipe away those tears, my baby.  

[...]  
The fruit is delicious, bitter is the seed!  
We will toil baby, and be happy,  
Waiting for the return of Mthethwa’s father.  
The morning star was shining when he left,  
He will come back at sunset.  
Wipe away those tears, my baby!

(Jolobe, 1962)

More often, however, in his absence, the man is plagued by the fear that the solidarity of the family may be endangered by the behaviour of a wayward wife. This fear is essentially male in nature and has given rise to myths and legends dealing with the father’s return and the heroic attempt to restore order. But order, on these terms, cannot be restored without betraying its masculine bias. Such is the theory of many feminist writers, who have seen in the Greek myth of Clytemnestra a classical example of the conflict between male and female principles of reality.
During an interview in 1986, the Italian feminist writer Dacia Maraini, author of the play *Dreams of Clytemnestra*, expressed the following thoughts on the character of Clytemnestra:

> What I intend to show in my play is that Clytemnestra is a loser, because her type of rupture with the world of the father is bound to fail, because our patriarchal society cannot forgive a woman who has freed her sexuality. Indeed, I think the myth of Clytemnestra has been created exactly for this purpose. In the myth, especially as Aeschylus portrays it, Clytemnestra is condemned not because she has killed her husband but because she has put herself in the place of her husband.

(Sumeli Weinberg, 1993:183, my translation)

On the surface, the above statement seems to imply that the author’s treatment of the myth of Clytemnestra deals chiefly with the motifs of revenge and power in the long and hard battle fought between the sexes. And indeed a feminist play cannot do otherwise. The exposure of past injustice against women is what prompts the writer in the first place to turn to classical themes for material. It is also important to remember that the myth of Clytemnestra involves intricate family relationships which span a number of generations and which are defined by bloody killings rather than by tender affection. Feminists have always held the view that the subjugation of women begins within the intimacy of the home. But the discovery of the nature of this suppression and the effect it has had on our society will ultimately lead Maraini to question man’s very notion of order and justice.

Even in the hands of Attic tragedians such as Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides who have been the chief promulgators of her myth, Clytemnestra remains a complex and enigmatic figure and cannot be conveniently accommodated as her husband’s murderess. Her tale, simply told, ‘by virtue of its very simplicity, is endowed with seemingly inexhaustibly dynamic quality. It has become a well-known text, both transparent and opaque, but one which is layered with an infinite virtuality of abstraction... a familiar terrain ever available for redeployment’ (Bevan, 1993:3–4). A brief reminder of the status of Clytemnestra in mythology could give us some interesting pointers in this direction.

She is married to Agamemnon, son of Atreus, and king of Argos, after he
slays her first husband and new-born child. The house of Atreus is guilty of accumulated atrocities where children kill their parents and parents kill their children and feed upon their flesh. Says Robert Graves in his book on myths that, from the beginning ‘Clytemnestra had small cause to love Agamemnon’ (Graves, 1967:52). Her twin sister Helen’s elopement with Paris sparks off the ten-year war between the Greeks and the Trojans. Clytemnestra’s feeling of rancour towards her husband could not have abated when, against her will, in order to ensure the success of the Greek army, Agamemnon, the Commander-in-Chief, sacrifices their daughter Iphigeneia by slitting her throat on the alter of Artemis. On his return, she murders him and his mistress Cassandra with the help of her lover, Aegisthus. Her son, Orestes, is ordered by Apollo to avenge his father’s death and is in turn relentlessly pursued by the Furies, or the Erinnyes, for having spilled his mother’s blood, but is in the end acquitted of his crime.

The nature of the complexity of Clytemnestra’s character is partly due to her psychological make-up and can be directly observed, as we have seen, from the circumstantial evidence of her plight as a woman and as a mother. Hers, however, is not a case study. Tempting as it may be, this line of interpretation will ultimately reduce her potential as a signifier. And though Maraini is concerned with the exposure of the fate of women under patriarchy, she would guard her reader against the danger of such over-simplification. For her, the story of Clytemnestra is, and will always remain, a myth, and ‘at the very least our understanding of myth in the postmodern world has become proteiform in the extreme’ (Bevan, 1993:3).

The author’s ‘redployment’ of myth in Dreams of Clytemnestra is akin to what Adriana Cavarero calls an act of ‘theft’. Cavarero is a respected classical scholar and one of the leading philosophers of sexual difference in Italy. In her book, playfully entitled In Spite of Plato, she describes the urge to confront ‘the entire system of Greek philosophy and the global horizon in which it operates [...] since the philosophy of antiquity posits itself at the onset of our history, making its mark on the destiny of the so-called ‘West’ (1995:4). Her modus operandi, therefore, consists

... of investigating the traces of the original act of erasure contained in the patriarchal order, the act upon which this order was first constructed and then continued to display itself. ... I will steal feminine figures from their context,
allowing the torn-up fabric to show the knots that hold together the conceptual canvas that hides the original crime.

(Cavarero, 1995:5)

Maraini’s attempt in her play to initiate this process of feminist deconstruction of an ancient tale is as direct as Cavarero’s. Her method of stealing ‘feminine figures from their context’ finds expression at the level of artistic discourse, thus opening it to multiple readings. It is a method with a purpose, made necessary by the absence of a female voice in the ethos of our present society. Maraini frees the figure of Clytemnestra, a product of male imagination, in order to reread her in the light of her own experience. And she invites her readers to do likewise. Indeed, Dreams of Clytemnestra, while drawing mainly on Aeschylus’s trilogy, The Oresteia, is an ordinary tale about an Italian family of poor Sicilian immigrants living near Florence in the seventies. The play’s intertextuality is openly and deliberately re-inforced by the creation of two distinct levels of reality: the world of the Aeschylean sub-text, which is functional only at the level of dreams, and the world of interpersonal relationships which mimics the first for the atrocities perpetrated, be they only on a psychological plane. While the oneiric level is conveyed poetically, and relies chiefly on allusion, the other, based on a daily, prosaic, and even vulgar language, is the carrier of the dramatic action. The effect of this juxtaposition is both startling and refreshing for the manner in which it defamiliarizes the old myth. Maraini cements the relationship between these two dramatic complexes by retaining the list of classical names for her characters.

What is more interesting in this case, however, is the way in which the act of rewriting is inscribed in the text, thus making the ‘theft’ of the figure of Clytemnestra overdetermined. On the one hand, as the palimpsest presupposes, the author’s reappropriation of the classical drama must be seen as an act of erasure of the original writing, and thus the means of giving new signification to her character. On the other hand, by drawing attention to her indebtedness to an earlier work, Maraini’s intertextuality also functions in reverse: as a way of uncovering in the Aeschylean text the previous act of erasure alluded to by Adriana Cavarero and committed at the birth of our civilization. On the political plane therefore, Maraini’s discourse on the condition of women in our society is a far cry from the crude attempt to reinstate the supremacy of a feminine order.
Instead of opting for the cumulative effect of linearity as a way of replacing the old with the new, her argument remains distinctly circular in that the promise of a better future, out of the present impasse, is via a return to the past. In this respect Maraini’s vision echoes philosopher Giorgio De Santillana’s understanding of what is truly revolutionary:

Generally, in modern times the word revolution implies the irreversible. It has brought along with it true History. Which, in truth, is none other than an escape forward. However, there is also an old meaning, still hidden from us and known only to authentic revolutionaries: and that is, a return to the origins. Our thoughts have turned to it since archaic times, and it is called palynogenesis... Every apocalyptic vision is a way of linking the end to the beginning so that time can once again become meaningful. (1985:20, my translation)

Past and future are thus irrevocably linked in Maraini’s work since the way out of the stalemate created by the polarization of the sexes is to transcend patriarchal dualism based, as she perceives it, on a split between the body and the mind. Two verses taken from one of Maraini’s poems, ‘Head of Medusa’, sum up the author’s commitment towards this form of regeneration:

Voglio tornare indietro/verso l’allegria del futuro.  
(I want to turn back/towards the happiness of the future.)

(Maraini, 1987:79)

What then is the true nature of ‘the original crime’ committed against humanity that Maraini is trying to unearth by repossessing the figure of Clytemnestra? How is it linked to the split between body and mind? Luce Irigaray’s central thesis in An Ethics of Sexual Difference (1993), which has inspired both Cavarero and Maraini, is that philosophy, and hence society and culture, are founded on an ancient matricide. For Maraini the story of Clytemnestra as represented by Aeschylus contains this matricide:

It took Aeschylus, who was acquainted with the Eleusinian mysteries, to relate to us the most cruel of family tales. He told us how Orestes, pursued by the Furies for having killed his mother, considered to be an unpardonable sacrilege in ancient society, asked to be judged by the tribunal of the gods, a tribunal made up entirely of men with the exception of Athena who, born from the head of Zeus, had no knowledge of the maternal womb. In defending Orestes, Apollo’s speech to the tribunal is new and astonishing: Orestes, says the young
god, should not be condemned because he did not strike the sacred beginning of life, but only a vase which contained the male seed. The mother is no longer at the origin of life but only a container of someone else’s life. It is the father who conceives, who bestows the breath of vital energy. The mother’s task is to nourish and nurture the child from birth on behalf of others.

(Maraini, 1996:30, my translation)

In Aeschylus, the dramatic conflict of the entire Trilogy rests on the notion that if Orestes is culpable of matricide, he is also the avenger of parricide. He is at the same time both guilty and innocent. Such was the power of these two principles, the maternal and the paternal, in Athenian society that the voting of the tribune of the Aeropagus is split in half. To remind us of the awesomeness of the deed, in Maraini’s play, as in Euripides’s Electra (1931), Orestes is initially beset with doubt and shrinks from the horror of matricide. He is portrayed, moreover, as a homosexual, placed by his otherness outside the sphere of male conformity, not yet hardened by the privilege of gender, and driven to action by his sister Electra, the self-elected guardian of their father’s honour and his law. In the ancient Aeschylean play, Apollo’s speech and Athena’s deciding vote acquits Orestes of his crime and puts an end to the funereal concatenation of family killings. With this resolution, the work of Aeschylus, both historically and ethically, is seen as a triumph for cultural evolution, marking the passage in Athens from an archaic society, bound by fate and the law of necessity, to one dominated by the forces of reason. It marks also the moment of transition from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society – a society based ultimately on the concept of justice.

The view that myth is the preserve of the collective memory and hence of history, and that Mother right preceded Father right in ancient Greek culture, found its most famous exponent in the nineteenth-century Swiss jurist and historian of Roman Law, Johann Jacob Bachofen. Like his feminist counterparts, Bachofen too, in his book on Mother Right (1967), traces the origin of patriarchy in the Aeschylean text which, he says, re-enacts the struggle between the Apollonian and the Demetrian principles, that is, between the rational faculties of man, represented by Apollo the god of enlightenment and prophecy, and the corporeal, tellurian forces embodied by the prototype of the earthly mother, Demeter, ‘the mother, the Great Mother...’, says Cavarero, ‘[whose] figure... is the foundation of
the feminine origin of life' (Cavarero, 1995:57,71). Bachofen, a contemporary of Nietzsche, sees in the struggle the source of all greatness, since in his desire for power man expresses his own uniqueness. The passage from Mother right to Father right reflects, therefore, society’s advance to a higher order as it liberates the human spirit from the ‘paralyzing fetters of a cosmic-physical view of life’ (Bachofen, 1967:236). Critics, right up to our own times, have further elaborated Bachofen’s view, calling The Oresteia ‘a feat of Western civilization: a dialectical struggle, a conflict between Will and Necessity, which establishes the law and justice above the brute force of nature’ (Fagles, in Aeschylus 1977:22).

Feminists like Maraini, while they would naturally not discount the essential function of rationality in any given culture, would however contest the validity of Bachofen’s evolutionary theory of society by questioning the fundamental assumptions of the Aechylean text. And here I draw on Roland Barthes’ definition of myth as a ‘type of speech defined by its intention... much more than by its literal sense...’ (1993:124). Maraini argues that the Aeschylean resolution is based on a compromise and it betrays the author’s indebtedness to his historical time. The most obvious and clamorous example, as already indicated, would be Apollo’s speech to the judges in defence of Orestes. Let us look at it more closely:

I will tell you, and I will answer correctly. Watch.  
The mother is no parent of that which is called  
her child, but only nurse of the new-planted seed  
that grows. The parent is he who mounts. A stranger she  
preserves a stranger’s seed, if no god interfere.  
I will show you proof of what I have explained. There can  
be a father without any mother. There she stands,  
the living witness, daughter of Olympian Zeus,  
she who was never fostered in the dark womb,  
yet such a child as no goddess could bring to birth.  

(Lattimore in Aeschylus, 1953:158)

According to Bachofen, Apollo’s speech in championing the right of the begetter ushers in the law of the new gods to which Apollo and Athena belong:

The child’s predominant connection with its mother is relinquished. Man is
raised above woman. The material principle is subordinated to the spiritual principle. Thus marriage for the first time attains its true height. For the Erinnyes... failed to honor Hera's decree, the sacred marriage bond. Clytemnestra's infringement of it was nothing to them: in their eyes it could not excuse Orestes' just, though bloody deed. In this sense father right is tantamount to marriage right, hence the starting point of a new era, an era of fixed order in family and state...

(Bachofen, 1967:161)

Linked to the marriage bond is Bachofen's concept that 'The close relation between child and father, the son's self-sacrifice for his begetter, require a far higher degree of moral development than mother love' (Bachofen, 1967:79). But the marriage bond can also be seen as a way of controlling birth and woman's reproductive function thus limiting her power. By contrast, says Cavarero, men have chosen death as the site of their power: 'Since death takes away life, they find in death a place they regard as more powerful than life' (Cavarero, 1995:68). The shift in perspective from the order of birth to the order of death, however, betrays man's fear of nothingness and his obsessive desire 'to endure, to survive' (Cavarero, 1995:7).

As we all know today, Apollo's argument rests, if you will permit me the pun, on a genetic misconception. Yet, in this instance, his error throws light more on the symbolizing power of language than on the nature of ancient beliefs. Indeed, it is through language that the Aeschylean discourse establishes its own self-referential reality aimed at the stabilization of the patriarchal symbolic order. Critics like Philip Vellacott (in Aeschylus, 1969:18) choose to read Apollo's far-fetched theory as a counterbalance to the implacable demand of the Furies, and hence of Mother right. Between these two extremes, Athena's intervention, in the name of her father Zeus, can be seen as the most enlightening solution to all the bloody violence.

According to Robert Graves, this solution was widely favoured by the priests in their intent 'once and for all, to invalidate the religious axiom that motherhood is more divine than fatherhood' (Graves, 1967:63).

What these critics fail to note, however, is that Apollo's speech is a perfect example of the 'juridical invasiveness' (Cavarero, 1995:77) of man-made law in blind support of the father's political order. That in essence Apollo's assumptions had already found their roots in Greek society is confirmed by Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia. She is his child before
Clytemnestra’s. And the mother has to play by the father’s rules. The dis­placement of the mother is thus a foregone conclusion, and maternity becomes an issue of public law when the son, Orestes, is called upon by Apollo to avenge his father and is acquitted by Athena of the crime of matricide. In the Aeschylean text, therefore, thanks to the presence of Apollo and Athena, the male perspective has found its own symbolic space. But, according to Adriana Cavarero, citing Luce Irigaray,

the place from which this gender speaks, a place that uproots humans from their maternal origin and therefore from physis, produces metaphysics as its supposed accomplishment. Metaphysics ... is what permeates the language of Western culture, as it has developed beyond the ancient matricide: it is the adventure of a ‘spirit [that] in its perfection ... destroys its first roots. Its soil has become culture, history, which successfully forget that anything that conceives has its origin in the flesh’.

(Cavarero, 1995:69; Irigaray, 1993:109)

What then of woman’s place? What then of Clytemnestra’s ‘sovereign subjectivity of her maternal power’ (Cavarero, 1995:78)? There is yet another device used in the Aeschylean plays which links them strategically to their ideological premise. While it is important to remember that Aeschylus’s treatment of Clytemnestra is both powerful and moving, it is also true that the strength of his presentation makes the resolution even more awe-inspiring for his audience. Nicole Loraux says, ‘Tragedy certainly does transgress and mix things up – this is its rule, its nature – but never to the point of irrevocably overturning the civic order of values’ (Loraux, 1987:60). In her book, Loraux explores the symbolic space given to women in Greek tragedies when taking their own lives or when being murdered, a symbolic space which, she concludes, differs in the case of men and women. Clytemnestra is killed by her son, Orestes, when he strikes her in the throat. According to Loraux, men ‘seldom die from being struck in the throat’ (1987:52). A woman’s throat, on the other hand, is not only a strong point of feminine beauty but also the point of greatest vulnerability. Sacrificial throat-cutting applies to women who die by the noose at their own hand, but more specifically to those who are immolated as virgins or, like Clytemnestra, have their throats slit as a sign of the application of the blood law.

And these deaths, for a Greek audience, were laden with religious values (1987:14). Loraux’s theory aims specifically at revealing the way in which,
through death, violent death, women gain mastery over their own fate and acquire a glory seldom achieved by Athenian women who in the main lived in anonymity. Think of Clytemnestra boldly offering her breast for Orestes’s knife. By making Orestes kill his mother in this manner, Clytemnestra – a ‘manly-woman’, as the Chorus calls her in the first play of the Trilogy, Agamemnon, for having defiantly ‘stepped in her husband’s role’ (Fagles in Aeschylus, 1977:44) – achieves in death a stature which must have been as awesome as that of any tragic hero. And indeed her tragedy is that of outraged motherhood. Yet, Loraux points out, by distinguishing between the masculine and female way of dying, the possible blurring of the sexual divide achieved by this glorification of woman is annulled and social order is once again restored. And order in the Aeschylean logic is that ‘justice is matricide’ (Fagles in Aeschylus, 1977:40).

In Dreams of Clytemnestra, Maraini attempts to recreate a space for that blighted heroine by uncovering the effects of her murder in modern patriarchy. It is a murder, as her play reveals, which not only took place long ago, but still continues today, as long as there are women, like Clytemnestra, who defy the marriage bond and openly take charge of their own sexuality. Maraini shows how the deep-rooted malaise in the relationship between the sexes is proportionate in degree to the absence of the Mother from public life. In so doing, she ventures, as Cavarero would say, into ‘the realm of thought to which men entrust their eternal and ultimately immortal essence, allowing the body, by now separate, to face its transient destiny’ (1995:70). This split between mind and body is reflected, as I have mentioned earlier, in the choice of the two dramatic complexes in the play: the modern and the ancient. While Clytemnestra, now an ordinary Italian housewife, suffers the same indignities as her tragic double, the sub-text of the Aeschylean world acts as the medium of the repressed, of the unconscious, hidden seat of her knowledge of the ancient wound.

The play begins with fragments of lines taken from a speech by the ghost of Clytemnestra in the Aeschylean Eumenides in which she calls the Erinnyes to awake and to revenge her death. It is also the ghost which haunts the modern Clytemnestra in her sleep:

Sleeping. What do I need of you! Sleeping!
Just as you abandon me for dead
I hear myself called murderer... in shadow
I live in shame: you know the guilt that
haunts me, I who from childhood have
suffered what I have suffered, and no god
remembers me, slaughtered by a matricidal hand.
Look with your heart, at my wounds -
for man sees in sleep only, by day
his eyes look without light.

(Maraini, 1994:185)

In this passage, the act of ‘seeing’ or ‘knowing’, conveyed by the juxtaposition of light and dark, is intentionally reversed by the author. This, for her, is the state of affairs in our world: ‘man sees in sleep only’, only, that is, when the forces of the irrational are let loose, and not ‘by day’, in the realm of Apollo. Indeed, modern society is not the promised land ushered in by the Aeschylean concept of justice which, as Fagles points out, ‘turns the darkness into light’ (Fagles in Aeschylus 1977:71). Nor is the advent of Father right, as Bachofen would have it, ‘the starting point of a new era, an era of fixed order in family and state’, which, paradoxically, owes its existence to the rigid application of its laws and the submission of woman into sameness, a reflection of the male vision of life.

Maraini’s reversal of dark and light, contrary to what it may seem, is not the pitting of two opposing forces against each other: reason vs the irrational; the author’s world view vs the Aeschylean; the Erinnyes vs Apollo, male and female. As I intimated earlier, she avoids the pitfall of needless confrontation. Starting from the premise that, since in today’s world woman’s space is defined by a lack, an absence, the only way forward is to recover that lost Mother, and the route to the origins. And ‘the Furies are our origins’ (Fagles in Aeschylus, 1977:38), and theirs is the symbol of dual power of vengeance and regeneration. The destructive force of the Furies should act as a healthy reminder of the fragility of our institutions and provide the active principle for a truly dynamic society. Yet, by placating the wrath of the Furies and by placing them within the confines of the city, Athena, in the Aeschylean drama, has effectively diminished their powers. Men, therefore, in their desire to go beyond the limitation of the flesh, have appropriated woman and have cast her in their own image. And, in negating the true space of woman, they have, as a consequence, compromised their own.
REACTION TO PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL CODES AMONG EMASWATI
Sisana Dlamini

INTRODUCTION

Like women in all other societies of the world, women amongst emaSwati find themselves placed in a context that is predominantly controlled by a strong patriarchal system. This paper aims at highlighting patriarchal codes that feature in various social structures of emaSwati. Proverbs and other sayings in the Swati language that reveal gender differences will form the basis of the discussion. From there, I go on to discuss other social codes that are seen to restrict a woman in this society. It is evident however, that such codes could not exist for long without a reaction from the affected group. This paper will therefore proceed to focus on some of the reactions to patriarchal domination that have been observed in the history of emaSwati. I look at how traditional society has reacted to gender-enforcing codes, and then conclude by focusing on some of the reactions encountered in modern emaSwati society.

HOW PROVERBS ENCODE GENDER CONSTRAINTS

When defining a proverb Guma (1985) says:

A proverb is a pithy sentence with a general bearing on life. It serves to express some 'homely truth' or a moral lesson in such an appropriate manner as to make one feel that no better words could have been used to describe the particular situation.

Another definition is given by Mutasa in his article in Sienaert (1994) in which he asserts:

... these witty sayings are pots that contain the age-old wisdom of the traditional people. They are philosophical and moral expressions shrunk into few words. They contain the fundamental truths about life in general and human nature in particular which people have observed.
Proverbs therefore are generally accepted as expressions of truth in the eyes of a particular society. Such truths may have been established over many long years within a society before they are accepted as proverbs. As such, they reflect the beliefs, perceptions, attitudes and generally the mores of a particular society. In this section, proverbial sayings will serve as a window for peeping into Swati society, and observing its norms and values regarding women. Proverbs by their very nature have existed in the language for a long time; their use by a speaker displays a good knowledge of the Swati language. The proverbs that are of relevance in this chapter are those that refer to gender relations. Other expressions that are also significant in this review are those that are used in a discriminatory manner in the Swati language.

As we will see from the examples below, proverbs are sometimes employed as patriarchal codes to enforce the secondary and submissive role that is expected of women in Swati society.

In Swati society there is a habitual attitude of not feeling at ease with a beautiful woman. She is usually feared for her ability to attract men. This fear of the power of feminine beauty is revealed in the proverb: Likhiwa lelihle ligcwala tibungu which may be translated as 'A fine fig is full of worms'. This proverb is derived from the fact that when one picks a beautiful fig there is some likelihood of finding worms inside when one opens it. The warning that this proverb issues is that you must be careful when you come across a beautiful woman. The possibility is that she may have a bad character. Such an expression is used to warn men who may be tempted to fall for such a woman.

**How Proverbs Maintain Patriarchal Marriage**

Marriage in this society is considered to be a very serious undertaking, especially for the woman. At the same time it is an institution that every woman is expected to enter into. In Swazi culture marriage is not just a union between husband and wife but also a link between two families who, through the marriage, are starting a complex interrelationship that is bound to continue for a long time. The old women related to the bride start preparing her long before the wedding day. Their main concern is
that she learns to accept all the difficulties that she will encounter in marriage. It is a concern which stems from the fact that the bride is sent out to the other family as their family’s ambassador. Her failure in marriage becomes their failure too, as it proves that they have failed to bring her up in the proper manner. As they advise her about marriage they tend to use proverbs that will highlight the fact that marriage is a time of hardship.

Hence they will quote a proverb like: Ekwendzeni kukamkhatsali. This saying may be translated as ‘Marriage is a place of problems’. The warning in the proverb is that no matter how strong one may be as a single woman, once one gets married that will change. A similar proverb is Umendvo ngumkhumulansika (‘Marriage pulls down the pillar’). This expression means that the young woman may be proud and fastidious before marriage but once married she will surrender her pride and be tamed. Another proverb relevant to marriage is Kwendza kutilahla (‘To marry is to throw yourself away’). The saying refers to the fact that a girl cannot tell beforehand how her marriage will turn out. One other proverb similar to this one in meaning is Umendvo awufunyelwa ligundvwane (‘No one can spy out a rat before getting into marriage’). The grim message here is that troubles that may be in store for the woman in marriage cannot be detected beforehand.

All these statements of traditional wisdom are shared with the bride who is about to get into this lifelong contract. If the young woman tries to explain how she thinks she will eliminate some of the problems said to be awaiting her in marriage, the older more experienced women may use this proverb: Akunalichalachala lelehlula sidvwaba (‘There is no woman so proud that she can defeat the loin skirt’, the loin skirt being the garment traditionally worn by married women). This saying emphasizes that the bride should not take things lightly, because in marriage she will encounter obstacles that will force her to surrender whatever attitude she has, and will force her into tameness and submission.

The old women continue using such language even after the newly-wed woman may have been sent back to her parents’ house for cheeky behaviour. The old and experienced people will say Umendvo uyancengwa (‘You must beg for marriage’). The message being driven home by this proverb is that a woman has to humble herself in a marriage if it is to be a success. Another popular expression is Emendwweni kukagoba gagu (‘In
REACTION TO PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL CODES AMONG EMASWATI

Although this conclusion was made about Ashante women, it also applies to women in Swati society.

ESTABLISHED WORD-USAGES WHICH DISCRIMINATE AGAINST WOMEN

There are also various uses of words and linguistic expressions in the Swati language that illustrate a certain widespread perception of women, in which we can see the attitude of the Swati people to a woman of their society.

Let us consider the example of a boy and a girl who are born to the same parents and who live in the same family. If the girl is discovered to be going out with two different men she is despised and called by cruel names. She is expected to behave herself so that she will be good material for the man who will pay lobola and marry her. In this case we can see that the lobola and pride are the motivation that make parents keep reminding their daughter about the necessity for good behaviour. Who would want to purchase second-hand material? Her misbehaving can never be accepted, as it would affect the amount of lobola that her father gets from whomever decides to marry her. On the other hand, if her brother within this same family is seen to be dating more than one girl, he gets praised for it. He is called inganwa, a name that places him above other young men who just have one girlfriend.

If this young woman falls pregnant before marriage she becomes a disgrace to the family. Swati society still holds onto the belief that all women
should get married. Hence a child born before marriage is also called by bad names. The child is called umlanjwana yet there is no name for the child born to her brother out of wedlock. The young woman herself ends up being called lijikamlente (‘the one who just throws her leg’), umjendevu (‘something that may not be enjoyed by anyone’) or libondza-lisuta (‘the one whose system has become loose’). These insulting expressions are used to warn every girl, especially every young girl, not to follow in the footsteps of the unfortunate young woman who has failed to conform to the prescribed norms.

DISCRIMINATORY TRADITIONAL CUSTOMS

An interesting thing to look at is the marriage ceremony itself. The red clay (libovu) that is smeared on the face of the bride is significant in the Swati culture. It is strongly believed that this clay cannot be used more than once on the same face. The implication is that a woman cannot be married more than once in her lifetime. The significance given to this libovu can be interpreted as a means of depriving women of the choice of moving out of a marriage once they have entered it. When one looks at the fact that this clay is not applied to the male partner’s face, though he is also involved in the marriage, it implies that he is exempted from this commitment. In other words, the commitment is one-sided in that it is binding on the woman but not binding on the man. Indeed, he can marry as many wives as he likes after this one. One can therefore see this practice as one of the forces used to control women and make them succumb to the subservient role that society expects them to play.

If a married woman has an illegitimate child within her marriage, it is a serious offence. Even though traditional society would prefer to keep the matter a secret and not speak of it at all, when the child has to be referred to, it is called ligoya (wild cat) or livezandlebe (the one who protrudes and is seen by the ears). What is of interest is that when the husband has a child outside of the marriage, by a mistress, that child is brought home to be accepted and cared for by the married wife. She is expected to be joyful that she can be of service to her husband. If she shows some dissatisfaction, society reprimands her and reminds her that ‘Wakutsatsela kutsi utewulondvolota tintsandzane takulelikhaya’. This
means 'You were married to care for such orphans'. In other words, you as the woman he married should be able to appreciate your duties.

EmaSwati also emphasize that *buhle bemfati busemtini wakhe*. That may be translated to mean 'the beauty of the woman is in her home'. In other words she can only be judged by what she does in her home and for her family.

The patriarchal ideology of this society is being furthered and enhanced by modern technology. On the Swazi Radio station there is a programme conducted by typically conservative men. The two men are there to read and respond to letters sent to them by people seeking personal advice. In most cases the problems that they handle are connected with marital relations. The arch conservative of the two, often referred to as 'Jim Gama', is trusted greatly by traditional society. In most of the cases he deals with, he manages to discredit women and enforce the patriarchal ideology. The radio programme is not surprisingly very popular among the conservatives who still insist that things must be done in the traditional way. If a man is found to have married according to Western civil law, he is despised and called by names. He is considered a fool as this type of marriage does not allow men to engage in polygyny.

**PROTEST AND CRITICISM**

The most important questions that come to any mind at this point of our discussion is: 'Are the women of this society content with the roles which are imposed on them? What have they done to show their dissatisfaction?'

It is of interest that traditionally women in this society were silenced by being told 'Tibi tendlu atishanyelelwa ngephandle' ('Dirt from inside your house should not be swept outside'). This is a reference to the expectation that as a woman you should not share your problems with an outsider. In this way women were deprived of the freedom of voicing their feelings about their own lives. Even in the traditional meetings they did not have the freedom of expressing their views. If a woman had something to say, something that needed to be heard at a traditional meeting, she would talk about it to her husband during the night when they were alone. The husband would then voice it in the meeting as his own view.
FOLKSONGS VOICING WOMEN’S PROTEST

However, nothing could stop them from protesting about the difficulties they encountered in their lives. Since time immemorial the women of Swati society have always given voice to their feelings and observations, and have expressed how they perceived themselves and the world around them. The folk songs that are sometimes referred to as traditional songs have been used as a channel through which the women could communicate their feelings, especially about those issues that pertain to their marriages and their status in society. The folk songs are songs that are composed and transmitted orally. Harap (1949) has this to say about the songs:

Folk song, further, is made and sung in response to functional needs, from lightening of work and protest against oppression to recreation of common people. On the whole, therefore, folk song genuinely expresses the values of the people in class societies.

Although these songs may be created for purposes of entertainment they also can be used as a spear for fighting with a person who is in power. Talking about this role of folk songs, Finnegan (1970) observes that:

This indirect means of communication with someone in power through the artistic medium of song is a way by which the singers hope to influence while at the same time avoiding the open danger of speaking directly.

In each case the singer or performer is one of the womenfolk and she sends out messages that concern other women. Hence they may be taken as a means of protest, used with the hope of effecting change.

Let us look at few examples of songs traditionally performed by married women:

Nans’ indvodz’ingishaya bo!

Chorus Mshaye ndvodza

Lv’ emagam’ ekutjelwa bo!

Chorus Mshaye ndvodza

Lv’ emagam’ emcamelo!

Chorus Mshaye ndvodza.

(‘Here is a man beating me up – oh!}
The woman singing this song conveys the message that she is being beaten up by her husband for a rumour about an extra-marital affair. The group of women who join in the chorus line are ironically saying she should be beaten up. The general result is to raise questions about a society that believes a woman should be beaten up if she misbehaves. The chorus is devised as a way of deliberately expressing disapproval. The use of irony as a technique here forcefully expresses the women's complaint, and ridicules society for believing that women should be beaten up. Wife-beating is a serious problem, aggravated by the fact that there is no legislation in Swazi society which protects women from being assaulted by their husbands.

Their culture sanctions it and polygyny is consequently a common institution amongst emaSwati. The most disturbing thing about it is that it often results in women entering a world of jealousy and uncertainty, since one wife may be pushed aside to make room for another. Though a wife cannot openly show her dissatisfaction, when she is among other women she may then sing songs like this one:

```
Ngeke ngithule mine
Chorus Hhawu suka thula mfati
Ngeke ngithule
Ngithulel' umfati
Umfat' efika
Angemuk' indvodza
Indvodz' ingeyami
Chorus Hhawu suka thula mfati.

('I will not keep quiet!
Oh no woman, keep quiet!
I will not keep quiet,
Keep quiet for a woman,
A woman who has just come
To take away my husband.
Oh no, keep quiet woman!')
```
In this chant the senior wife expresses that she is tired of the husband who is clearly showing more love for the new wife. The chorus sung by the group of women sarcastically echoes the societal expectation that respect and dignity should be maintained at all costs. This chorus thus also (like the last one) ridicules a society that makes such severe demands on the senior wife. The song protests against these demands mainly because a large number of married women are affected by such rivalry. The statement that the frustrated woman must keep quiet is just an irony for ‘Say it loud and clear!’

In most cases the world is made to understand that women who are in polygynous marriages are content with the situation. But their being silent about it is often just to impress the world, as it is taboo in African culture openly to show jealousy.

Let us also look at this other song that expresses the anger of a woman.

Vila lenja!
Ukhutsala ntsambama
Emasimu alele
Wena ukhutsala ntsambama.

‘You lazy dog!
You only get active at night.
The fields are not ploughed.
You only get active at night.’

This is a song that reveals how the woman feels about a lazy man. In effect she is losing her temper and no longer has control over what she says. She ridicules the man who just sits the whole day long and then boasts of having energy in bed. The language used in this song expresses her disgust. She is able to utter such insulting words under the protection of orature; no single individual can be identified with or held responsible for the lyric as it is owned by all the womenfolk of her society. The composer is unknown. The singer benefits from this feature of folksong as it frees her to express her views without fear of being confronted. The woman in this song is calling the attention of a society that thinks men are superior, to the fact that this is not always the case. She also calls for a
shift from thinking that men are superior beings, because some of them do not even take their responsibilities seriously. People should not be classified by their sex but by their personalities.

WOMEN’S SUPPORT ORGANIZATIONS

However, these oral songs have not been very effective in bringing about the required change as the people in control of power have conveniently ignored the messages they bear. The emphasis on human rights in recent years in Swaziland has paved the way for organizations that fight for the rights of women. It is worth mentioning that the emergence of women’s organizations in the Swazi kingdom has met with great criticism from the conservatives. The significance of these organizations is that they speak with one voice on behalf of women, who hardly had a chance to voice their feelings openly in the past.

To mention a few of them: there is the Swaziland Women’s Action Group Against Abuse, usually referred to as SWAGAA. This is a women’s movement that aims at protecting a woman against abuse of any nature. Another support organization is the Women and Law in Southern Africa Research Project. Employees of this office conduct research into the feelings of women about the different customary laws that are often oppressive of them. They also look at the existing Western equivalents and then combine the two to arrive at a documented law that suits the women of the present day. This may be taken as a great stride towards liberating the women of Swati society. Besides the fact that some of these organizations have professional legal employees who at least can give sound advice to women who need it, they also give practical legal assistance when it becomes necessary.

CONTEMPORARY VOICES OF PROTEST

The step taken by the oldest daily newspaper in the country to create a forum for women’s views, is regarded as an important move towards freedom of expression. There is a column dedicated to women every Tuesday. At least women in this society may now write about their feel-
ings and views. There is hope that the complaints may eventually receive attention from those in power. Let us look at a few of the letters that have already been published in The Times of Swaziland.

On 6 June 1995 there was a piece with the title ‘How long will women be subjected to discrimination?’ Among the points made and questions raised in this letter are the following:

- Why can’t women be allowed to take out loans just as their husbands can, without their spouse’s consent?
- Our custom allows a man to have as many wives as he likes and he is also free to dump a woman (kumngcwabaphila).
- A woman’s case in siSwati will only be tried in the presence of her husband, but the husband’s case goes on without his wife.

These few points illustrate clearly enough that women in Swati society are serious about the changes they want. Another interesting letter is the one published in The Times of Swaziland of May 9, 1995. Here is part of that letter, which had the title ‘Who said there is no discrimination against women in Swaziland?’

The scale of equality is especially out of balance in our imbalanced Swaziland. The side marked ‘woman’ is weighed down with responsibility while the side marked ‘man’ rides high with power.

The fact that such letters are published, to be read by the nation, shows beyond doubt that the idea of change is gradually being accepted in this society. The King, Mswati III, has also responded positively to the call for change. He called for representatives of the various women’s organizations that exist in his country, to come and report to him after the Beijing conference. In the The Times of Swaziland of 12 May 1996 a report on that meeting has the title ‘Jubilation after historical meeting’. In the report it is stated that the King had called on these representatives of women. He also congratulated the women for their success in business. The paper confirms how happy these women were in the words ‘There was excitement written all over their faces, yet fear of not being understood and so many ‘What ifs?’ were being muttered’. However, it is also mentioned in this report that there were people who did not approve of the meeting.
REACTION TO PATRIARCHAL SOCIAL CODES AMONG EMASWATI

The words ‘... after all, women were already being called all sorts of names, ranging from crazy to mad, and lunatics who wanted impossible change, so the last was for the king to agree with that analysis’ say it all about the general attitude of society towards women.

CONCLUSION

From this discussion it is clear that many attempts have been made to maintain a patriarchal ideology amongst emaSwati. It also becomes clear on the other hand that women are becoming ever more prepared to fight this battle to their utmost. It has been through their struggle and efforts that some improvements have taken and are taking place. These are the same women who, prior to this time, had only the traditional folksongs as their means of expression, and of communicating their views on the oppressive issues they encountered.

Today these very women are able to speak out through the organizations that exist to support them in the struggle. Important though such organizations are, one cannot underestimate the critical role of the folksongs, as a mechanism to challenge the patriarchal ideology that prevailed. These songs also offered a kind of therapy or counsel for the women of this society, who otherwise might easily have succumbed to the tensions and ills of being systematically discriminated against. The question that keeps coming to mind is: ‘What did our sisters in cultures that did not have folksongs use for challenging the patriarchy that seems to have existed in all societies?’

Department of African Languages, Unisa
BIBLIOGRAPHY


WOMEN AT WORK

...
The work that women do covers the whole spectrum of organized and informal labour. They are in the professions and business, they are a major element of wage labour, they work in their homes and fields. Yet their work is typically unseen (as in the work done in the home) and undervalued (as in the nurturing professions of teaching, secretarial work and nursing). As wage-earners in the industrial economy, women fill the lowest ranks and only rarely rise to managerial positions. ‘Most Black women are employed as domestics, which remains the hardest kind of work with the longest working hours. An appreciable proportion of gainfully occupied women are in the nursing and teaching professions; in recent years there has been considerable growth of Black women workers in industrial employment. We have witnessed too, in recent years, the spectacular presence of Black women in executive positions, spectacular because there are so few of them that they stand out as a spectacle. The overwhelming majority of businesswomen are pavement vendors just eking out an existence’ (Mandela, 1990:8).

The four essays here are studies of the marginalization and oppression of women in their work: in the very structures of organised labour, the trade unions; in the professions of nursing and teaching; and in the daily tasks which fall to the lot of rural women as a result of the migrant labour system. Saranel Benjamin discusses the gender relations and attitudes towards women to be found in the trade unions, and amasses some startling facts (e.g., the high incident of sexual harassment at leadership levels) and figures (e.g., of females at various levels in the hierarchy) to prove that, like all the other major institutions of our society, trade unionism is a product of, and is maintained as an ongoing project of, the patriarchy. These findings are discrepant with the liberational nature of trade unionism, and moves are being made to eradicate sexism and restore to trade unionism its true character of striving for equality for all.

In the traditionally feminine profession of nursing, there are discriminatory and dominating attitudes that aim at keeping women in an ancillary role,
and making the field of health care the preserve of male authority. In her analysis of the nursing profession, Val Ehlers describes the formative influences on it of the church, the military and economic forces, to explain the ruling image of ‘the good nurse’. This is someone in a stiffly starched cap and uniform who follows orders unthinkingly, reveres the male doctors who give the orders, has no purposes or interests of her own (least of all in money) but exists to serve others and the noble profession of nursing. The manipulations by which this image is implanted in the minds of trainee nurses and becomes the norm, and the obstacles that are put in the way of anyone who tries to empower nurses to reject it, are made clear.

Then there is the analysis of gender attitudes in education, both toward girl pupils and women teachers, and how these attitudes contribute to the maintenance of high rates of illiteracy among Black women. Miriam Lephalala and Pinkie Mabunda record how things stand for African women in the teaching profession, and in education in general. They trace the low status and negative self-esteem of women teachers compared to their male colleagues to factors in traditional culture. For instance, girls are trained to serve their brothers and male relatives food in a submissive manner, usually on their knees, which creates in them a feeling of inferiority and subservience to males. The syllabuses and text books do nothing to correct this impression, and so women come to think that education is not for them but their brothers. The low literacy rates among black women, especially in the country districts, is an index of this attitude. Basic literacy programmes for rural women give them not only the ability to read, but also the belief that they have a right to education, and have as much self-worth and dignity as the men in the community.

Finally there is the desperate marginalization of rural Black women living alone with their children because their husbands are away working in the cities. The daily demands of finding the means of survival for themselves and their families from the earth is organized as informal collective labour. Mpumi Rulumeni-Ntlombeni has a sharp eye for the small details of survival strategies, for the fact that ‘income’ is not reckoned by these women in monetary terms. Her description of the daily economies they practise, and of the spirit of communal self-help that prevails among them, is not explicitly gender related. But in the second part of the essay, the author records the results of a survey on decision-making: who makes the deci-
sions, and about what kinds of household questions they make them. It emerges that the rural women who manage to support their children and themselves in the absence of their migrant husbands, and often without adequate or even any support from them, will still defer to them before taking any decisions.

The essays assembled in this section, focussed as they are on the conditions of women and the relation between the sexes in the workplace, reveal situations that need immediate and practical attention. Saranel Benjamin in discussing patriarchal constraints in the trade unions, poses the questions: How shall we deal with the curious anomaly of trade unionism: that it fights for women’s rights in the workplace but denies them equal rights in trade union structures? What can be done to make husbands more comfortable with their wives’ attending union meetings? How can the presence of women in leadership positions in the unions be increased? Then, with regard to health care, Val Ehlers brings home the difficult issues like: What are we going to do to train our nurses to be proud, self-confident and independent workers? How can we counter the weight of centuries of paternalistic tradition in the nursing profession?

The position is no better for women teachers, as the paper by Pinkie Mabunda and Miriam Lephalala shows, and here the reader is made aware that the need for change is doubly urgent: not only are women teachers in lowly positions and burdened with low self-esteem in the educational setup, they have to operate with patriarchal curriculums. These are the combined conditions in which the rising generations of girls and young women are being educated. In Mpumi Rulumeni-Ntombeni’s study of how rural women survive without money, and of their very limited decision-making powers, the questions that the reader is left with are about the deep structures of society and traditional life, and the intransigence of the problem. Indeed, the female community of Bolotwa (the site of this paper) do not question their lot, and their survival strategies speak of courage and strength of spirit. There is only a background murmur, supplied perhaps by a reader aware of other ways of life, or suggested perhaps by the extraordinary results of the survey on decision-making in the community which the author records, that things might be different. This is the dilemma of development feminism: in the context of ‘developing communities’, how far does or should the agent of change follow an agen-
da extrinsic to the situation? Is meaningful change possible otherwise? By putting these questions on the table, the authors bring the facts of gender injustice to the reader's attention, and at the same time, motivate the imperative for change.

Department of Philosophy and Institute for Gender Studies
Patriarchal Constraints on Trade Union Women

Saranel Benjamin

Introduction

Trade unions have always played a liberating role and been associated with terms such as ‘democracy’, ‘freedom’ and ‘the struggle for human dignity’. The institution of trade unionism gave practical effect to these words which otherwise seemed a distant ideology beyond the reach of the mass of people – the workers. So it would seem contradictory to be addressing an issue like women’s oppression within a movement that was at the forefront of the liberation struggle in South Africa. But somehow patriarchy has a way of infiltrating every sphere of life, the trade union movement being no exception.

The trade unions have always been involved in trying to achieve recognition, participation and equality for all in the workplace. Unfortunately, the recognition of the status of women within the trade unions has not been achieved nor has there been maximum participation of women in the trade unions. The inequality that trade union women are subjected to within the trade union still exists. This, as we shall see, can be laid at the door of patriarchal attitudes and beliefs.

What is the Patriarchy?

The definition of a ‘patriarch’ is the paternal leader of a family or tribe (American Heritage Dictionary, 1976). Extending this to ‘patriarchy’, we might say that it is a social system where leadership and power are confined to the male line. In today’s world, patriarchy has coloured the belief system of society at large. It has dictated the way our religions have been interpreted, the way our culture has been defined, and the way we speak, act and think about the world, including ourselves.

Socialization and the conscientizing of members of the community has taken place through the propagation of male-dominated beliefs.
Patriarchal society is characterized by unequal power relations between men and women where men are socialized to use ‘power-over’ behaviours in relation to women as a group (McKone, 1993). The propagation of male-dominant attitudes has permeated almost all cultures to such an extent that the subservience of women to men, and the suppression of women by men, has become an unquestioned customary way of life.

The social organization in which we exist not only propagates the dominant male principle informally, but actually institutionalizes it, so that it becomes a part of the social realm, featuring in legislature, religious codes, and health and educational practices. The dominance of the male principle has caused the female principle to be weakened or ‘censored’ so that it has given rise to what Mugo calls a ‘negative silence’ (1993). This ‘negative silence’ has given birth to what we know as cultural silence: subservience on the part of women. Women have lost control over their voices, their creativity, their self-will – their whole person – and thereby have lost their identities as human beings equal to men. Patriarchy makes men the reference point or the standard measure by which society fixes a woman’s worth. Hence women become defined as an extension of, an appendage to men (Mugo, 1993). A woman is not seen as a complete entity in her own right but is given an identity based on her role and character in relation to the dominant male.

Patriarchy in the Economy

In patriarchal systems, all women suffer similar gender injustices but it is their difference in social class that makes the degree of their suffering different. Where patriarchy occurs in a capitalist society, the women from the working class suffer the worse forms of discrimination and abuse. Mugo states that ‘the economic system is set up in such a way that [women] are deprived, impoverished and dehumanized by a breadline, marginal type of existence’ (Mugo, 1993). In a South African context, it is fair to say that the majority of working class women are black women. Hence the black South African woman has to overcome a three-tier oppression, viz. sex, class and race. Moreover, most South African women maintain the home, do the cooking and the cleaning within the household. This work has remained invisible and the only recognition that it has
received is that the work is a woman’s ‘natural lot’ (Baskin, 1991:370).

For a trade union woman, her oppression in the categories of sex, class and race is given definition through patriarchal constraints. Seen at their most primary level, patriarchal constraints for a trade union woman are labour roles; they take the form of a woman’s compound shift where she plays the role of mother, housekeeper, cook, worker and trade unionist.

Patriarchy continues to make its presence felt in the positioning of women in the economy. Since women are not physically as strong as men, historically they were the ones to stay home and be the carers and nurturers of the family whilst the men went out and hunted for food. In modern times, conditions have changed and men no longer have to hunt for food. Women however, though they may no longer stay at home, are still labelled as the nurturers and care-givers of men and children. Throughout time, this philosophy has remained. It has extended itself into education, employment and the economy. In school, girls are socialized into taking subjects such as home economics, typing and cooking classes, while boys are socialized into taking subjects such as technical drawing, woodwork, science and advanced mathematics. In tertiary education, the majority of women take courses in nursing or teaching, thus preparing themselves for the caring and nurturing professions whilst men choose courses that prepare them for managerial positions, or professional careers as doctors and lawyers.

A woman’s work is not recognized in the formal economy – that is the factories, shops and farms. Women make up the majority of workers in the clothing, domestic-work and service sectors and also constitute a large proportion of the farming, food-processing, footwear and textiles workforce. However, women, regardless of the sector in which they are found, are guaranteed to be performing the lowest-paid jobs. Women are also more likely to be found in temporary employment where they are paid less than the minimum wage. Statistics show that this trend is on the increase. There was a 32% growth between 1965 and 1985 in the number of black South African women involved in menial work, in unskilled labour such as cleaning and nursemaiding, and fewer women became directly involved in production (Baskin, 1991:370).
PATRIARCHAL TRADE UNIONS

Having identified how women are placed in the national economy, we find that this placement is reflected in the position of women in the trade unions. The number of women who have been integrated into the labour movement is almost proportional to the number of working women in the formal economy. Based on official statistics women constituted 23% of the formal workforce in 1960, 30.6% in 1970, 36% in 1985 and 41% in 1991 (Trade Union Research Project, 1994:71). It is estimated that in 1993, 23% of South Africa’s workforce was organized in trade unions, and that less than one third of trade union members were women (O’Reagan and Thompson, 1993:25).

Because women constitute the minority of union membership, they are never the first priority. It was only when unions had firmly established themselves on the shopfloor that they began to attend to issues such as gender equality and started to take some kind of initiative to draw more women into the unions. Unions that have had women membership since the early eighties have managed to accomplish important agreements with their employers. In 1983, the Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of South Africa (CCAWUSA, formerly SACCAWU) signed the first maternity agreement with OK Bazaars; the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) managed to win an equal pay package for grade 4 machine operators at Dunlop; CWIU also got a manager fired for sexually harassing a woman worker (Isaacs, 1995b).

But what has happened to the women within the unions themselves? There is no denying that the achieving of maternity benefits, of equal pay for work of equal value, of safe and healthy work environments, by unions in negotiation with employers, is important for women workers. But in weighing up the position of women in the union movement, this achievement must be seen together with what is happening internally, within the unions themselves. We find, on close examination, that the democratic rights that have been achieved by the unions for their women members in the workplace are not paralleled by democratic rights for women within the unions.
BARRIERS AGAINST WOMEN IN THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT

It can easily be said that there is an attitude developing within the union movement that women's issues are just that—issues that concern only women. What compounds this attitude is the feeling that women are subservient creatures who do not need or require that much attention. If women stayed home and looked after the children and did the housework, they wouldn't be having the problems that have been associated with formal employment and subsequently with the unions. This attitude has permeated the trade union movement and has resulted in the following barriers against women in the unions.

GETTING WOMEN'S ISSUES TAKEN SERIOUSLY

The first barrier to women trade unionists was that they are in the minority in terms of union membership. As mentioned above, one of the historical reasons for gender inequality in the unions is that there were never enough women members for their special concerns to be made union priorities.

The figures for the two major trade union federations, the Congress of Trade Unions of South Africa (COSATU) and the National Council of Trade Unions (NACTU) show a weaker presence of women. Since 1985, women have made up 35% of COSATU's membership (Dove, 1992) and in NACTU, women constitute 40% of the membership (Mofokeng and Tshabalala, 1993). The reason for less women being organized into the unions was that women had the sole responsibility of taking care of the children and the household. This was securely endorsed by the patriarchal attitudes towards the family and household. There have been several reports of husbands and boyfriends of trade union women who have stopped women from attending union meetings or have even dragged the women out of the meetings. There have also been reports of women being physically assaulted for attending union meetings.

It has been debated at COSATU congresses whether to set up separate women's structures within the federation and within the federation's affiliates. In 1987, COSATU set up a women's forum. However, its status was
relegated to subcommittee level under the National Education Committee. None of the male comrades took the women's structure seriously. In fact it was seen as an easy way to get rid of trade union women's issues.

Women were the ones who took the responsibility for organizing the forums on their own. They were forced to pull in women who were already committed to being either shopstewards or organizers. Hence it was difficult to give the forums their full attention. Also, fewer and fewer resources were made available to the women's structures. Some of the women who took up positions lacked any knowledge of how a union worked or how to get women's issues onto the agenda. Therefore, issues that were seriously affecting the women in the unions were being ghetto-ized and were not receiving the necessary attention. Women's forums were made to report to regional education forums and regional office bearers who would then take the reports, recommendations and requests to the regional executive. The regional education committees and the regional executive are both male-dominated and almost all regional office bearers are men (Dove, 1992).

THE SCARCITY OF WOMEN IN LEADERSHIP POSITIONS

The second obstacle in the path of trade union women is the representation of women in leadership positions, or rather the lack thereof. The under-representation of women at leadership level became obvious in the early eighties. It was only fully addressed in COSATU in 1989 where it was recognized that this under-representation was a crucial issue. The same problem persists in NACTU.

Statistics show that although 36% of COSATU's membership are women, only 14% are shopstewards at the lowest level (Dove, 1992). In total, COSATU has 590 regional office bearers that constitute the second-level leadership. Of the 590 regional office bearers only 77 are women. However, the South African Domestic Workers' Union (SADWU) causes a distortion to the true figures as they are an all-women union. But if we remove SADWU from the picture, of the 590 regional office bearers only 8% are women and that, in terms of numbers, is 47. On the third tier of
leadership, COSATU and its affiliates have 95 national office bearers. If we again remove the SADWU members, we see that only 8% of these national office bearers are women, i.e. 8 women. In the highest level of leadership of COSATU we find that no general secretaries or union presidents are women. We also find that in COSATU's nine regions all the regional secretaries and chairpersons are men. The statistics are understandable in unions where there are few or no women members but they become unacceptable in unions where the majority of members are women (Naledi, 1994). In NACTU, the situation is not as bleak - in its highest level of leadership, there are two general secretaries, two presidents and three vice-presidents who are women (Mofokeng and Tshabalala, 1993).

According to Dove, the reason why women don't get elected to leadership roles is because of historical and cultural disadvantages. The election of more men into leadership positions by both men and women is actually a reflection of the unequal power relations that exist between men and women in society in general. We have seen that it is traditional for women to be the least educated, most unskilled and the least secure workers. They have less confidence than the more educated, articulate and skilled workers, usually men, when having to face management. In terms of leadership, society has always assumed that men are more commanding, authoritative, never admitting weakness or defeat whilst a woman's style of leadership tends to be more co-operative, accommodating and self-critical, born out of the patriarchal belief that women ought to be subservient (Dove, 1992).

Being a trade union organizer requires long hours, sometimes with inadequate transport facilities and difficult accommodation in areas that one has to visit. It is perceived that this job is too dangerous for women and therefore most organizers are men. Again, this is caused by a blind prejudice that exists in our society. Because of this, women who apply for such jobs are discriminated against by the male-dominated employment committees who will decide that she is not up to the job (Dove, 1992). There are no affirmative action policies in most unions to ensure that women get employed as organizers, even in those unions where there is greater potential for women trade unionists.
The consequences of the lack of representation of women at the levels of leadership are that education and training, the higher levels of debate and the decision-making structures become inaccessible to women. As a result of this, women never get the opportunity to develop themselves or prepare themselves for leadership roles through the use of skills training. Also, the lack of women at the most influential levels of leadership gives rise to what Dove calls 'gender-blind' demands (Dove, 1992) where demands are made without referring to the situation of women. Within the union itself, because women are not represented at leadership levels, the issues that affect women do not get put on agendas and never get dealt with (Dove, 1992).

In a survey done by the International Labour Organization on 14 unions in 1993, it was found that:

- 9 out of the 14 unions had a formal policy on gender equality;
- only the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU), the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU) and the Chemical Workers Industrial Union (CWIU) had executive committee compositions which reflected the proportion of female membership;
- CWIU was the only union which reserved seats for women on its executive;
- 10 unions had women's committees; the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU) and the Financial Union (SASBO) did not have any;
- not a single union had negotiators who were trained on equality issues;
- SACTWU had the highest percentage of women on negotiating teams, followed by CWIU (Isaacs, 1995a).

The women from COSATU as well as NACTU have repeatedly called for the introduction of proportional representation through the implementation of a quota system. This system should be used as a mechanism to ensure the participation of women in leadership and decision making. Proportional representation in terms of the quota system would reserve seats for women at the different levels of leadership. However, the issue of proportional representation has sparked off a furious debate. Many unions argued that women must stand for positions and be elected on
They felt that the reservation of seats for women would result in tokenism. At the 1994 COSATU congress the proposal for proportional representation was not accepted. Instead a resolution was passed on building women’s participation and leadership within COSATU (Isaacs, 1995a).

SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN THE TRADE UNIONS

The third and final barrier facing women in the trade union movement is the issue of sexual harassment. According to the Sexual Harassment Education Project, it is estimated that six out of every ten women are sexually harassed in the trade unions. This high incidence is characteristic of the imbalance of power that exists between the men and women in the unions.

Another aspect to sexual harassment is what Dove calls ‘bed politics’ (Dove, 1992) – a tactic devised by the men in the trade unions to scare off women from leadership positions. Some men in the unions feel that women who assert themselves in order to get elected into leadership positions need to be ‘tamed’. They would encourage a man at the same level of leadership that the woman is standing for, to seduce her on the presumption that this would give him power over her. Many men in the unions abuse their positions of power to take advantage of a woman sexually. This not only undermines the position of women in the unions but also creates tension and hostility between the women in the unions. Sexual harassment has come up repeatedly and it has been often cited as the biggest problem facing women in the unions today.

SOME GAINS

On the other hand, to the advantage of women in the unions, there have been a small number of localized but positive gains won by trade union women. Some of these include:

- The South African Transport and Allied Workers Union (SATAWU, formerly SA Railways and Harbours Workers Union), the Food and Allied
Workers Union (FAWU), the South African Municipal Workers Union (SAMWU), the Paper, Printing and Allied Workers Union (PPAWU) and the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) have given the women’s forums direct access to constitutional structures in the unions;
• SAMWU has achieved proportional representation of women at a national level;
• The Commercial, Catering and Allied Workers Union of SA (CCAWUSA, formerly SACCAWU) has integrated parental rights and training issues into its collective bargaining programme and has also designed gender sensitization courses for its male office bearers;
• the National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) has given gender issues priority on its agendas;
• the Transport and General Workers Union (TGWU) has made sexual harassment, childcare and AIDS key union issues;
• the South African Clothing and Textile Workers Union (SACTWU has achieved proportional representation on its structures and its members are now participating in COSATU’s women’s forums;
• COSATU has drawn up and implemented a CODE OF CONDUCT on sexual harassment and has initiated a series of training programmes for its affiliates around sexual harassment (Isaacs, 1995a).

**CONCLUSION**

We have found through numerous studies on the trade unions that:

• the employment structure of the unions is biased in favour of men in that men are occupying the higher paid, more powerful positions and have easier access to upward development;
• women are under-represented in decision making structures of the unions, despite some unions having a majority of women in their membership;
• unions’ gender structures have not been given the necessary resources and assistance to allow them to operate effectively;
• the trade union environment is not conducive to the active participation of women;
• women members face sexual harassment from male fellow members (Dove, 1992).
The barriers facing women in the unions that have been discussed here are not the only ones, but at present they are the most crucial. What these barriers do, is enforce gender constraints on women within the trade unions, constraints which are essentially no different from the barriers women face in the workplace, in the family and in the community. The philosophies of a patriarchal system have infiltrated the mindsets of both men and women so that men are defined as the dominant creatures and women accept this premise.

In the trade unions, patriarchal belief-sets have ensured that men have the right to maximum participation in the unions and access to all levels of leadership. They have also ensured that the majority of women do not get organized into a union, that they do not get the rights to participate at any level in the union and they are not given access to leadership roles. Worse still, men suppress women in the unions in the most primitive way, by using their power over women in sexual terms. No violation can be worse.

It would seem however that the women in the trade unions are overcoming the subservience and docility that was placed on them by the patriarchal beliefs in society. They are striving to break the constraints that they face in the union movement. So far, we have seen that trade union women have been successful in getting women's issues recognized and accounted for. But as far as patriarchy goes, we know that it affects the way people think, act and speak. Therefore the fight is far from over – the battle to change people's mindsets regarding gender in the trade union movement has just begun.

Workers' College, Durban
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Isaacs, S. 1995a. Empowering women in SACCWU. Durban: TURP.


