

Global Issues

African Trade Unions and the Politics of Gender: A Collection of Interviews with Rhoda Boateng, Marjorie Chanda Mutale, Deborah Freeman, Leontine Mbolanomena and Maria Joaquina Almeida

Interviewed by
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What we see and experience across the board in Africa is lip service to encouraging women's participation in programmes and activities through quotas, with little effort to promote women in leadership (Rhoda Boateng, Programme Coordinator, ITUC-Africa).

While there has been an increasing focus over the past decade on the need to attract more women into African trade unions and to strengthen the positions of existing members, this has been “in many cases more talk than action” (Minter, 2014: 12). The need to turn positive rhetoric into reality is pressing, as the ITUC-Africa (2021) notes that women continue to be among the most vulnerable groups exposed to the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result of the pandemic, the incomes of women have fallen, they save less and their job security has been reduced compared to men. Moreover, women have a higher risk of gender-based violence in the wake of the pandemic. It is, therefore, important for African trade unions to recruit more women into their ranks, to increase protection for existing trade unionists and to take action to enable women to have more opportunities to reach the higher echelons of labour organisations.

To obtain first-hand perspectives of issues affecting women trade unionists continent-wide, Mihaela Cojocaru and Mark McQuinn interviewed a Programme Coordinator at ITUC-Africa and officials at labour organisations from countries in Lusophone, Francophone and Anglophone Africa. One of the officials is the first woman to hold the position of Director General of a trade union centre in Cabo Verde. Another is Secretary General of the Union of Informal Workers Association (UNIWA), the first national trade union for informal workers in Ghana. The other officials are from organisations which represent members in both the formal and informal sectors.

KEY

RB = Rhoda Boateng: Programme Coordinator, ITUC-Africa

MCM = Marjorie Chanda Mutale: National Women's Vice Secretary and Representative on the National Executive Council of the Zambia Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers (ZUFIAW)

DF = Deborah Freeman: Secretary General of the Union of Informal Workers Association of Ghana (UNIWA)

LM = Leontine Mbolanomena: Secretary General of the Union des Syndicats Autonomes de Madagascar (USAM, Union of Autonomous Trade Unions of Madagascar)

MJA = Maria Joaquina Almeida: Director General of the União Nacional dos Trabalhadores de Cabo Verde: Central Sindical (UNTC-CS, National Union of Workers of Cabo Verde)

Question 1:**What are the key issues for women in the workplace that trade unions need to address?**

RB: From working at the ITUC-Africa, the key issues trade unions need to address are lack of decent jobs for women, the absence of adequate social protection provision, non-recognition of care work, limited access to leadership roles for women, sexual harassment and violence at the workplace.

MCM: In Zambia, despite campaigns on gender issues and the implementation of regulations enshrining gender equality, discrimination against women workers is pervasive and occurs in almost every professional setting. Many women toil excessively hard in their workplaces just to prove themselves equal to their male counterparts. Gender discrimination in the workplace takes a number of forms. First, financial inequality is an issue. Women earn lower wages than men although they share identical professional qualifications and skills. Second, pregnancy and motherhood are frequently the sources of discrimination against women. The excuses that women may become pregnant or have to devote a substantial amount of time to work in the reproductive sphere are used to deny them employment when applying for jobs and promotion when in post. Third, gender stereotyping occurs. This takes the form of perspectives among those controlling promotion procedures in workplaces that women lack the focus and determination necessary to be top managers or professionals. These views prevent women from climbing the professional ladder, since they are not appointed – on the grounds of gender – to posts for which they are qualified and have the requisite experience.

LM: Gender issues are very important in the workplace in Madagascar. The two main problems women workers in the country face are the heavy double burden of productive and reproductive work and ignorance of their employment rights. The majority of women work a six-day week and only have Sundays for their home lives. Despite this situation, women are expected to do the work in the reproductive sphere. This double burden within a patriarchal society is a major reason for the high levels of domestic violence in Madagascar. Female trade unionists report that men in their households believe that all work in the reproductive sector should be done by women. They resort to physical violence against women when they perceive tasks, such as cooking and cleaning, are not being done well. Moreover, this double burden means that women have little time to take training courses or participate in routine union activities. Even when they have time to take training courses, female trade unionists report that most of the content offered in the workplace does not meet their needs and expectations. Concerning the second point, ignorance of employment regulations, women workers are often victims of unfair dismissal, which they do not contest through lack of knowledge of procedures. Even when women are aware of protective employment relations, many do not take action for fear of reprisals.

DF: Gender issues affecting women workers in Ghana are vital to address. It is absolutely essential to recruit more women working in the informal sector into UNIWA, which is struggling to retain members. The union had 100 000 members prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. However, it has been hard to keep track of who remains a member because of the confused situation facing informal sector workers since the start of the pandemic. It is difficult to maintain the morale of trade unionists in this situation, and attendance at union meetings has become lower since the pandemic began. One of UNIWA's main areas of focus is supporting women working in markets,

which are a major source of employment for those in the informal sector in Ghana. A major problem for UNIWA members working in markets is access to space in which to do business. The government strictly controls space in the markets, and informal sector workers regularly get evicted for not having formal permits, which are beyond their purchasing power. Markets are in a deplorable state and it is vital for the government to fund major refurbishments to increase the safety of women working in them. Most markets are poorly lit, through lack of electricity, making them dangerous to navigate and attractive to criminals. Furthermore, toilet facilities are often lacking or sub-standard. This is a significant problem for women working in markets, particularly during menstruation.

MJA: Violence against, and harassment of, women in the workplace remain major problems in Cabo Verde. There is a presumption that women are only good workers if they act like men. Another major issue is wage discrimination. Many women are paid lower wages than men while doing equivalent work.

Question 2:

How are African trade unions addressing gender issues?

RB: Many trade unions in Africa have established gender departments or desks and adopted dedicated policies and programmes geared towards addressing the specific issues affecting women in the workplace. At the macro level, unions are pushing for the implementation of National Social Protection policies as well as making inputs into Regional Social Protection protocols. Trade unions are also lobbying for the ratification and domestication of relevant protocols, notably the African Union's Charter on Social Security and Protection. Furthermore, trade unions are advocating for the ratification of recommendations and conventions geared towards addressing some of the issues faced by women. These include International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment at Work, Convention 189 and Recommendation 201 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, Recommendation 202 on Social Protection Floors, and Recommendation 204 on Transitioning from the Informal to the Formal Economy.

MCM: Trade unions in Zambia have achieved successes in addressing the issues faced by women workers in a number of areas. Three examples, focusing on different areas of trade union work, can be given. First, married women in Zambia used to have no right to get a house loan or other financial services, such as a salary advance, from employers without a written letter of agreement from their husbands. This problem led to some married women declaring that they were single because they could then apply for the housing allowance available to unmarried women without needing a letter of consent from their husbands. Trade union campaigning succeeded in changing this unfair practice, so married women can now obtain an internal company or house loan, as well as a salary advance, without the need for endorsement by their husbands. Second, women workers in Zambia were discriminated against in the area of promotions, which were disproportionately awarded to male workers. Trade unions fought successfully to have an appraisal system implemented, which has helped to ensure that promotion is decided on objective criteria and gender is not a consideration. Third, trade unions have been successful in altering dress code rules in the workplace in Zambia. In the past, women were not allowed to wear trousers to work but only dresses and skirts. Through campaigning by trade unions women can now wear any work-appropriate clothes at their places of employment.

LM: Trade union membership in Madagascar is high in areas where women are prevalent, such as running small businesses in the informal sector. Trade union work has raised awareness of gender discrimination in the informal sector. However, it is in this sector that violation of workers' rights is high and on the rise. As women workers are often unaware of their labour rights and/or afraid to report issues to trade unions, there is little improvement in their living and working conditions.

DF: UNIWA's membership is 73 per cent female, so it is vital for the union to address the issues facing women. These issues are a priority for UNIWA. However, UNIWA's direct suggestions and requests for help to the government in Ghana are ignored. UNIWA has some leverage in its dealings with the government through the support of the Trades Union Congress of Ghana (TUCG). UNIWA makes suggestions and requests through the TUCG, which puts them forward to the government, with successful outcomes on occasion. As the TUCG has a national profile and a degree of respect from the government, it is a useful intermediary for UNIWA in channelling its requests. Moreover, through these suggestions made by UNIWA, officials at the TUCG have gained more knowledge of gender issues facing workers in the informal sector.

MJA: In 2005 UNTC-CS created an exclusive department for women within the trade union centre, based in Praia, the capital city of Cabo Verde. It is called the UNTC-CS Commission of Women Trade Unionists. Its main objective is to fight for the empowerment of female workers and to ensure there is no discrimination against women in the labour force. This organisation could not have been created without financial and technical support from the Confederacion Sindical de Comisiones Obreras de España (CC.OO, Trade Union Confederation of Workers' Commissions of Spain) and the International Labour Organization. The CC.OO, in particular, has done a good job of providing financial support for programmes to empower women workers in both the urban and rural areas of Cabo Verde. This support allowed us to run programmes supporting women workers on all the inhabited islands of Cabo Verde. The UNTC-CS Commission of Women Trade Unionists runs a successful programme focusing on assistance to women workers in the informal sector. It provides training on all aspects of running businesses. The programme also encourages women in the informal sector, many of whom are single mothers, to join the national social pension scheme – the National Centre of Social Pensions (CNPS, Centro Nacional de Pensões Sociais) – and provides advice on how this can be done. In helping many women to obtain a decent pension after they finish working, this has been a successful aspect of the union's work. However, the external funding for these programmes almost stopped during the COVID-19 pandemic and UNTC-CS does not have the financial capacity on its own to continue running these programmes. This highlights the need on the part of trade unions for external support to run programmes aimed at empowering women workers in Cabo Verde.

Question 3:

How important is it to have more women trade unionists in positions of power?

RB: It is important and best if women trade unionists address issues facing females in the workplace in Africa, as they have lived experience of these problems. Psychologically, they are more empathetic and sensitive than male trade unionists to issues women face, notably hormonal problems, the balancing of work and family life, occupational risks and hazards, and abuse and violence at the workplace. Consequently, women trade union officials are better able to find solutions to these problems than male counterparts.

MCM: It is important for women trade unionists in Zambia to be in positions of power in the workplace. However, it is difficult for women to stay in positions of power, because of the problem of the lateral transfer of active female trade unionists. When management becomes aware that a female trade unionist is active in the workplace and has the knowledge and charisma to progress in the union hierarchy, they will arrange for her to be transferred to a position in the firm based in another town, involving a long daily commute to work. In these cases, the female official often cannot then attend union meetings. It is important, therefore, for trade unions to arrange and finance travel for the official with a babysitter for her children or to ensure that relatives can look after her children while she attends meetings. The Zambia Union of Financial Institutions and Allied Workers (ZUFIAW) fought successfully for breast-feeding hours to be allocated to women workers. Workers with babies can leave the work premises an hour before normal close of business to feed them, or babies can be brought to the workplace to be breast-fed in private rooms. This success has encouraged women trade union members to stay in unions and take part in campaigns.

LM: It is important in Madagascar to increase the number of women in positions of power in trade unions. The USAM, in conjunction with the ITUC, has undertaken a participatory gender audit, which shows that 40 per cent of the governing bodies of union affiliates are occupied by women. This relatively high figure shows that women have become more active, forthright and dynamic in the Malagasy trade union movement in recent years.

DF: It is important to have more women trade unionists in positions of power in Ghana. It is better if a woman trade unionist is promoting gender issues. It takes a woman to really articulate women's concerns about work issues.

MJA: It is important in Cabo Verde, since many women are suffering discriminatory practices in the workplace and female trade unionists understand these problems better than men. The UNTC-CS Commission of Women Trade Unionists was created to put women at the forefront of fighting for their interests, and there are no men involved in its work. UNTC-CS receives constant complaints from women who suffer sexual harassment at work. As the Secretary General of UNTC-CS, I deal with many cases of sexual harassment. Maybe because I'm a woman, victims of sexual harassment feel more comfortable talking to me. A man may not understand what women have been through as victims of sexual harassment; they might even argue that it is the woman's fault. Given this situation, it is important for women to be in positions of power in African trade unions.

Question 4:

What are the major challenges to increasing female representation in African trade unions?

RB: The main challenges are resistance from employers and heavy family life demands on women workers. Moreover, there is resistance to trade union membership from female workers themselves, due to limited understanding of the role of labour organisations. Many women workers regard trade unions as unattractive, due to perceived patriarchy within unions and inadequate services and benefits provided by such organisations to women workers.

LM: Malagasy culture is patriarchal, so women play a secondary role to men. This makes it difficult for women to take leading roles during union meetings. Consequently, a self-fulfilling prophecy

occurs, where men argue that women contribute little during union meetings and are not, therefore, credible as leaders. In addition, during union meetings – and when taking training courses – women members often have to leave early or can only attend part-time because they also have domestic responsibilities. This leads to women getting less training and obtaining fewer qualifications than men, which, in turn, prevents them achieving promotion.

DF: In Ghana, women trade unionists are generally respected. Moreover, labour laws do cover women's rights, and legislation is generally taken seriously and adhered to in most cases. However, issues in the reproductive sphere need to be addressed if female representation in trade unions is to be increased. Women still do more of the household work than men, so it is not easy for them to also work full-time as trade union officials. An issue which has come up recently concerns pregnancy. When female trade unionists are pregnant, it can be difficult for them to travel to work on projects which are taking place away from offices. Trade unions have become more aware of this issue recently and started to provide help for pregnant women officials working on labour projects which require travel.

MJA: There are many challenges to increasing female representation in trade unions in Cabo Verde. First, it is not easy to mobilise women to join a union or take part in union campaigns. Many women are reluctant because of strong societal beliefs in traditional gender roles, which are prevalent in Cabo Verde. Women do not want the media exposure that would come with being a trade union official, as this would make them vulnerable to criticism from people close to them and in the wider society. There is also a lack of support from husbands, who say that women should take care of the children and cook. However, UNTC-CS has been working to highlight the fact that it is important for women trade unionists to take part in campaigns, as this will benefit all workers, irrespective of their gender. Second, the government does not support programmes to increase the representation of women in trade unions. The government takes the position that trade unions are only adversarial organisations and therefore will not provide any support for them. They are only interested in silencing trade unions. Third, it is hard to increase the representation of women in trade unions on peripheral islands in Cabo Verde because of poor communication links. The high costs of travel to outlying islands in Cabo Verde makes it difficult for UNTC-CS to organise initiatives aimed at increasing the number of women in trade unions there.

Question 5:

Is there prejudice against women trade unionists in Africa on the grounds of gender?

RB: There is prejudice against female trade union officials in Africa compared to men. Stereotyping of female trade union officials still occurs in many ways and, consequently, they find it difficult to get promotion.

MCM: There is a need to be assertive and alert in Zambia so that even the smallest discrimination against female trade unionists is recognised and challenged. If this does not occur, traditional patriarchal cultural attitudes and practices will be cemented and the subordinate position of women in the workforce, and within trade unions, will not be addressed. While trade union campaigns have reduced discriminatory practices and behaviour in the workplace, there should be no relaxation because females still do not get equal pay to men. Men in a place of work usually use Mr when asked to state their titles, while the single women use Ms. At ZUFIAW we encourage married women also to use Ms, on the grounds that if they use Mrs as a title, the knowledge that they are

married may lead to prejudice against them when applying for promotion. There is still a prejudiced line of thought among some in positions of power in the workplace that married women focus more on their domestic role than their work in the productive sector.

DF: The trade union movement in Ghana is a man's world. It is a hard truth for women that many men in the trade union movement feel superior to women. The Trades Union Congress of Ghana has never before had a female General Secretary. I am the first woman General Secretary of a trade union in Ghana. In general, women trade unionists struggle with various forms of prejudice. Cultural norms are a source of prejudice against female trade unionists. Many men hold patriarchal views that make it difficult for them to accept control by women in the workplace and at home. Culture eats deeply into people. Consequently, men try to undermine the authority of women who hold positions of power in trade unions. Some male trade unionists even threaten to leave unions where women hold positions of power on the grounds that they are not capable of doing a good job. Currently, I am contesting for the leadership of the Musicians' Union with other candidates. In the north of Ghana, it is a cultural norm that women should not lead men. So, I strategised deeply about how to campaign effectively in the region. I stated that my objective is to serve people and not to lead them.

MJA: In Cabo Verde, prejudice can be clearly seen from the fact that there are few women in positions of power in trade unions. A woman needs to have a powerful personality and a lot of determination to obtain a leadership position in a trade union in Cabo Verde. During my candidacy in 2016 for the post of Secretary General of UNTC-CS, I was attacked on gender grounds by fellow trade unionists. These attacks strengthened my resolve and made me realise that male trade unionists were afraid of me. They criticised me on the grounds that I did not understand anything about unionism. They argued that I did not understand the nuances of union diplomacy when dealing with workers' issues. They also claimed that I did not understand labour laws. This was absurd, as I hold a university degree in law, unlike many male union leaders, who are older and not highly educated or qualified. They have not kept up with changes in society. For example, many union members now have professional training, so it is important that officials are well qualified and constantly update their skills in order to represent them effectively. Another point showing prejudice against female trade unionists is that their work is endlessly scrutinised for mistakes, while the same is not true for men. When male trade unionists make errors in Cabo Verde, they are excused, but this is never the case with women, who are always called to account. Women trade unionists have to show they are competent hour by hour, day by day, but this burden does not fall on their male counterparts.

Question 6:

Is there a need for dedicated gender departments in African trade unions?

RB: It is useful to have a dedicated department dealing with gender issues at national trade union federations and the head offices of individual unions. Gender issues are particular and, thus, need specific attention and focus from experts. Thus, a dedicated department with a focal person or – where possible – a team is necessary for the successful implementation of gender activities and programmes. This is necessary at all levels – sectoral, national and regional.

LM: It is important to have a dedicated gender department within trade unions in Madagascar. At USAM, the Comité des Femmes, a dedicated gender department, focuses on, and addresses,

discrimination against women workers. Gender issues are a major problem in Madagascar, so a dedicated gender department is a vital part of the fight for the rights of women in the workplace.

DF: It is necessary to have gender departments in trade unions in Africa. UNIWA has a Women's Committee as part of its structure. Furthermore, the position in the union of Second Vice Chairperson is reserved solely for a woman and the advancement of women's interests is the main role of the job. Through these arrangements it is guaranteed that the interests of women who are union members will not be side-lined.

MJA: Gender departments are a good idea. It is also necessary to ensure that women are represented throughout wider union structures. All the main union bodies should have women representatives. In general, more efforts are needed to integrate women into unions in Cabo Verde. The creation of the women-only department – the UNTC-CS Commission of Women Trade Unionists – has benefitted female trade unionists in a number of ways. It has given them breathing space and allowed them to gain experience of union work in a supportive environment

Question 7:

To what extent is there a need to go beyond the creation of gender departments or desks in African trade unions to improve the position of women workers?

RB: The creation of gender departments in trade unions alone is not sufficient to improve the position of women workers in Africa. The creation of these gender departments should only be regarded as a starting point. There is a need to go beyond the creation of gender departments or desks at trade unions in several ways. First, a gender policy and strategic plan must be constructed which articulates the position and workplan of the union, including the budget for programmes and activities. Second, adequate resources to finance the gender budget and workplan must be allocated by the trade union. This is important to avoid the gender policy and strategic plan becoming just a wish list. Third, people with the technical expertise and experience of successfully implementing and monitoring workplans and programmes must be employed by trade unions. Furthermore, all these actions are possible only with the political will of the top leadership at unions, which should have a strong commitment to prioritising gender issues within the organisation.

LM: Beyond gender departments, there is a need for external finance and support to create projects on the ground aimed at improving the position of women in the Malagasy workforce. Women trade unionists in Madagascar want practical support above all else. The projects should all highlight the importance of women being involved in trade unions. The activities should include a technical training component and support practical programmes that empower women, particularly the creation of credit facilities to allow women trade unionists to instigate and sustain their own projects after technical training.

DF: There is a need to go beyond just having gender departments or desk officers at trade unions. Practical support for women trade unionists is very important. UNIWA organises vocational training courses for women in the informal sector in Ghana, which are certificated and help them to gain the necessary skills to run businesses effectively. Job creation is the biggest problem for UNIWA. Many women in the informal work on the streets, which was not possible at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic.

MJA: We have to make sure in Cabo Verde that all union departments are gender-sensitive and constantly active in empowering women workers in all labour spheres. It is also vital to ensure that women trade unionists can get skills training and undertake courses which will provide them with qualifications that will allow them to progress at work. The provision of skills training and a chance to gain qualifications are the main factors that motivate women to join trade unions.

Question 8:

Do you give any credence to the view that trade unions in African should concentrate on defending and promoting the rights of working people as a whole and concentrate less on gender?

RB: Gender issues are part of broader working-class issues, which should be fought for concurrently, and by everyone. However, as many gender issues are specific, there is value in unpacking and paying close attention to them.

MJA: Social class comes first in Cabo Verde. However, within social class struggles we have to pay special attention to problems facing women. Many women in Cabo Verde have little education, take care of household duties and suffer a considerable amount of abuse in different settings. Therefore, it is important that trade unions address gender issues in a comprehensive way, focusing on changing discriminatory practices and attitudes in society, in the workplace and within unions. We also work with local immigrant associations to help female immigrants. During the COVID-19 pandemic we provided food support for female immigrants. However, it is difficult to engage with immigrants, as many are afraid that government authorities will denounce them if they seek trade union support.

Question 9:

Are there any issues with male workers who believe that more females being recruited to trade unions brings unwanted competition for them?

RB: I see some validity in this perspective. This is particularly so because male workers and leaders continuously demonstrate patriarchy by giving little space, attention and support to making way for women leaders.

DF: In the trade union movement in Ghana, men want women to be involved but only as colleagues who serve them in some way, not as leaders. Men in trade unions sometimes encourage the recruitment of female staff for cynical reasons. First, some male trade unionists encourage the recruitment of women on the basis that they will not be able to compete effectively when promotion opportunities arise. Moreover, there is a gender pay gap among Ghanaians; women are paid less than men. Some male trade unionists, therefore, prefer women to be recruited, as they will be paid less, leaving more of the budget to be distributed to the men in salaries. Some male trade unionists also favour the recruitment of women to lead trade union projects funded by external donors, based on the assumption that they may become pregnant, providing opportunities for men to take over when the women go on maternity leave. The men believe that external donors will be happy to see women leading the projects. However, if the leaders become pregnant there will be few, if any, other qualified women in a position to take over the leadership, so men are likely to get the opportunity.

MJA: In Cabo Verde, there are clearly issues with male workers regarding more females being recruited to trade unions as bringing unwanted competition for them. Trade union work in Cabo Verde has traditionally been undertaken by male chauvinists. However, in recent years, this has changed and more women have become trade union officials. Male trade unionists feel threatened, particularly because women have shown an ability to deal more constructively with workers' conflicts than their male counterparts. Male trade union officials tend to be confrontational when dealing with labour disputes. Women trade union officials, on the other hand, tend to look for constructive solutions, so that nobody feels they have completely lost out. Male trade union officials lack these sensitivities and feel threatened by women who exhibit them to good effect during labour disputes. Overall, women officials have brought a breath of fresh air to trade union work in Cabo Verde. Male trade union officials are not yet ready to concede ground to women coming into the movement but will have to accept change.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

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