

□ Interview with women unionists in Nigeria



“Pulling women into the limelight”

In 1988, the Nigerian Labour Congress established a Women’s Wing, which now has active committees in most of the 30 states which make up the Federal Republic. Many of NLC’s affiliates have also recently established Women’s Wings. JANE BARRET discussed their struggle with the executive of the NLC Women’s Wing in Jos, administrative capital of Plateau State in the north.

The five members of the Jos Women's Wing interviewed by Jane Barret are:

Rita Goyit: Chairperson of the Jos Women's Wing, is a full-time radio and television broadcaster and journalist, and an executive member of Rattawu, the union for radio, television and theatre workers.

Anne Vou Zang: Treasurer of the Nurses and Midwives Union in Jos.

Josephine Esika: Secretary of the Jos Women's Wing and member of Nasu, the union for non-academic staff of universities.

Hannatu Adamu: Vice-president of the Jos Women's Wing, and chairperson of the Women's Wing in her own union, the Nurses and Midwives Union.

Charity Chagu: Treasurer of the Jos Women's Wing, and member of the National Union of Teachers.

Labour Bulletin: What are the organisational tasks facing women activists in the Nigerian unions?

Esika: Our task is to pull women into the limelight. We call meetings and find there is a poor attendance of women. Women need to be encouraged to team together to fight – sometimes those of us who are active feel like a lone voice in the wilderness.

Adamu: It's not only women – the whole middle cadre of the unions don't participate much. But especially the women. Poverty is the source of so many problems – poorly paid workers, many of whom are women, can't even afford the cost of transport to meetings. So the problem has to be put in the context of the whole orientation of the trade union movement. We have to work hard to appeal to the poorly paid workers as a whole. In the past, many poorly paid workers have only been attracted to the unions because of the temptation of corruption.

Chagu: There is also the problem of the control of all structures by men – sometimes invitations to meetings are not passed on to women members in the lower structures!

Adamu: The position of women in the home makes it hard for

“Increasingly, women are seeing divorce as the only way to achieve freedom”

women workers to participate in union structures. For example, it is still common for men to collect their wives' pay – so the women end up with no control over their finances – they don't even have the bus fare for a meeting! A woman can't even take her child to hospital without the permission of her husband. This is compounded by religious issues, especially in areas like Kano, which is the heart of Islam in Nigeria. In Jos, there is a mixture of religions and women are freer. All over, there are still men who don't allow their wives to participate in the Women's Wing. But women all over are becoming very aware, and they are determined to participate. And, increasingly they are seeing divorce as the only way to achieve freedom. Increasing numbers of women are choosing divorce.

Labour Bulletin: As a matter of interest – what is your marital status? From my own experience in South Africa, most of the active women in the unions are not married.

Chagu: Of the five of us, I am the only one married. Hannatu is widowed, Rita and Anne are single, and Josephine is single. My husband is supportive of my involvement – I'm lucky we have an understanding. So, it seems it might be similar to South Africa!

Goyit: As a single woman, the fact of working gives you some protection against social pressures, but you still get criticised from all sides. You are expected to live with your parents, no matter what your age. I am 29 and I have finally moved to my own small place – just a room, but it's my own.

Labour Bulletin: What are the origins of the Women's Wing, and what progress has been made in establishing it nationally?

Goyit: Women workers in Lagos formed their own Women's Committee ten years ago. But their status was not official. It is now official NLC policy to set up constitutional Women's Wings in every state, but so far this is the case only in five regions. The problem is some confusion. There is not yet a national committee, so women in

the different regions have to struggle on their own. In frustration, we organised our own national meeting in 1993. Although the last NLC Conference, in 1992, approved the setting up of a national committee, the constitution of that committee has not yet been decided by the national executive.

Firstly, we need to establish a functioning national Women's Wing, including the appointment of a full-time head. Then we also need workshops at a state level to ensure the functioning of the state Women's Wings, and to agree on a common programme.

Labour Bulletin: How would you describe the overall objectives of the Women's Wing?

Goyit: Ultimately we would wish to see women integrated into the mainstream of the NLC. We would not like to be seen to be running a separate movement. But the reality at the moment is that women are not delegated any responsibility within the organisation and, in reality, "equal opportunities", even within the organisation, do not exist. The same is true in the political process. Women are the majority of voters in the country, yet their husbands tell them who to vote for! So we also have a role to play in developing the political consciousness of women.

Labour Bulletin: What are some of the concrete issues you have been taking up?

Vou Zang: We have for years been tackling

the issue of maternity rights. Despite the apparent rights of nursing mothers – four months guaranteed paid maternity leave in some states – many women are discriminated against. Unmarried mothers are not paid while on maternity leave. Even within the NLC, there has been resistance to fighting for the rights of unmarried mothers – they use the "moral decadence" argument! Some women get around it by changing their name to their grandfather's name. But why should a right be dependent on such a procedure of denying who you are?

Goyit: Then there is the whole area of reproductive health. This is an issue already taken up by WIN. WIN stands for Women in Nigeria and is a national organisation of which I am an active member. The biggest health problem for women in the rural north is what we call VVF – infections which result from very bad tearing in childbirth. It is common there because so many women are forced to marry very young, and they have children in their early teens, when they are not fully developed. A woman who is 15 and unmarried is regarded as a disgrace and is hidden indoors. So we have to tackle both the health problem and the related social problems.

Childcare is also a concrete issue to be tackled. There are very few nursery schools or day care centres. Most working mothers employ nannies known as "housegirls", who are treated almost as slaves – low pay, no

offs, expected to do all household chores. At the moment, it is simply a dream for these women to be organised – but it is a must if sisterhood and comradeship is to become a reality.

Labour Bulletin: We have a similar problem in South Africa, with most domestic workers not yet unionised. So it seems we have a lot in common as a basis for an ongoing sisterhood between the women of the NLC and the women of COSATU! ☆

