

## **Refilwe Ndzuta**

### **Abstract**

Refilwe Ndzuta was at one time general secretary of the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union (PWAU) having started as an administrator in the union. After 1994 she became an ANC provincial MP in Gauteng. The focus of this interview is the position of women in society and in the trade unions when she worked in the trade union movement from the mid-1970s until 1994. She talks in depth about problems that women faced, the difficulties of trying to organise women into trade unions, how women would vote for men to represent them before choosing a fellow female colleague. A big obstacle to uniting women was traditional African culture which to her is synonymous with women's oppression and she gives examples of how this manifests itself. Jealousy between women, especially when one woman is seen to surpass others, she describes as another stumbling block preventing achieving the unity of women. Setting up women's committees and the women's forum where women could debate amongst themselves, become confident speakers without being intimidated by men was to her crucial for a woman to find herself and then build a strong women's movement. She also describes how trade unions encouraged women trade unionists to become involved politically in their own communities.

Facilitator: This is an interview with Refilwe Ndzuta, the date is 25 June 2010 interview is done by Brown Maaba. Thank you for making yourself available for this interview, please tell me when were you born, where and the kind of family you come from and what motivated you to eventually be part of the women's struggle?

Respondent: I was born in Eastern Cape, (unclear) the then Transkei, okay I was brought up there, I attended school (unclear) night school and (unclear) after that (unclear) and after that I came to Johannesburg it must have been 1974, when I got here I came to do a course, a secretarial course then I started working for Malawi Government Labour Representative which was based in Braamfontein until 19 .., I worked there something like two years, I had problems with the (unclear) it wasn't good, in fact quite frankly I can say I left because of sexual harassment. I can't go into details, but I just could not stand .., I was a

young girl at the time and dealing with married men etc., they just did as they pleased and they wanted to handle you anyhow. And then in 1980 I started working for the Paper Wood and Allied Workers Union and later became ..(unclear) with the Allied Workers Union after we had met with the I can't remember, ..(unclear) Allied Workers Union, I think that was ..., then we met and then we met Paper Printing and Allied Workers Union.

I started as a secretary however during those years it was difficult to be office based because unions did not have resources, so I also had to be an organiser at the same time, I would go to the factories, train shop stewards and you know, I will do both and during those years we used to collect subscriptions cash from the members, so every Friday we had to go and collect from the factories from the workers.

The way I got involved with the general politics was because I used to see whenever a chief, in the rural villages, if there's supposed to be a meeting the people of the village had to give him livestock before they can talk to him in order to buy him. I couldn't understand why the chief was taking so much from poor people. That is how I grew up, I couldn't understand why the poor must contribute to a chief who has everything. So that is how my mentality changed, I was not comfortable with the way people were treated. I couldn't do anything about that, first of all I was a young girl, and couldn't tell elderly people such things, it is not within our culture as you know. We would have debates between girls and boys about who is better than the other, that also motivated me against dominance by men.

So when I was in the unions I was happy because I was working with men and I can say Sappi Paper and Carlton paper – those were the factories,

we used to organise, we organised as far as Piet Retief, we also organised in KZN, Inkatha was ruling KZN at the time, they were not happy with COSATU ..(unclear) hence they formed UWUSA ..(unclear) in order to penetrate those factories, for instance Sappi and ..(unclear) all of the Sappi's we managed to get them under our union, Carlton Paper .., that is how I got involved. And then when it came to women's issues, ..(unclear) many women were members, but the women would elect men to be their shop stewards – I couldn't understand because they were more than members, their working conditions were also not the same as men. Hence we formed what we called the committee of women where we could try and liberate the women's minds that they do have a say, they must say what they want to say, and also we taught them to understand whether the men will represent them or not, are they also prepared to work for 9 months when they are pregnant. We tried to show them that that is not healthy. During that time there was this whole issue of family planning, they will never be given a choice, ..(unclear) they were given just anything ..(unclear)

End of recording

Respondent: contd .., and then by that time then, okay I would try and show the women about their rights, how they can fight for their right. I mean you can't fight for a right you don't even know, you must first of all be aware that I am entitled to this, therefore I must fight for it, otherwise it's pointless to go around and tell women about you must resist when your husband did this and this and that, it will never work. That woman must first of all know who she is. Not just women rights. In fact we usually say women rights are human rights, unless a woman is conscious or aware of her rights, then she will be able to stand up and fight and say "so and

so's father this and this I don't think we can do anymore". But as long as you just go and tell women you are being oppressed by your men do this and that, instead you are making them to be more stubborn and to remain in those bondages because they will just ask you "who are you, who are you to tell us what to do or what to say to our men, how must we run our families". It is impossible.

So then I tried this in our union. In fact male comrades used to make a mockery of it and say "Refilwe do you think what you are doing is going to help these women", because it was so difficult then. When women knock off at work they would come to the offices and would talk over about these issues. They would be nervous and be in a hurry because they have to get home as soon as possible, they have to go and look after their husbands and things like that. At that time the following things were common: when a woman wakes up in the morning, she has to take care of the kids, she has to clean them and prepare them for school; she has to do the same for the husband as well, she will be the last to get ready. When the husbands arrives home, he has his Sowetan and reads the newspaper and wait for the woman to get back, at times he would not even make fire so that the poor woman must find the fire ready for her to cook. The poor woman will first make fire, prepare supper and prepares for the following morning. We used to call this triple oppression because a woman at that time, of course even now, was oppressed because her gender, of her colour and at work because she was not properly recognised, even if she is doing the same job as a man she would be paid less compared to her male counterpart. We used to make a joke and say then there's the fourth oppression, after all of this, the man is waiting for you he wants sex. You are too tired, he does not understand that you are tired. So we used to joke and say that is the fourth oppression.

I'm talking about mainly how I got into this. I would make a joke to the men when they say "what are you going to do for these women" and the others would say, "my wife would never come and attend this". I told them that it is because your wife is not a member of this union, if she was we were going to let her go home but you must know that your girl child will never walk the streets at night, she will never walk freely in the streets because she's a girl and she's ultimately going to be a woman. She will be abused, you know all these funny things that boys and men do to women, if a woman is passing, they will pass all the funny remarks. I would ask them because some women would have to bear sexual harassment at work because they wanted a job, they wanted to maintain their jobs, and I would say to them "you comrades, don't even know how the working situation of where your wife works, you can make a joke of what I am doing to these women but you don't know how your wife is being treated in her workplace because she will not tell you when she gets home, that some supervisor touches her breasts etc". She will never say that. People thought I was crazy. So that is how I got involved in this, and in fact that is one the thing that made me to be in the Gauteng Legislature because it didn't end in the paper union, in my union. We then formed COSATU Women Forum.

In 1990 on 1 April the movement was launched formally. What made it to be more popular at that point in time it was because there was a labour deal that was in the process of being legislated which was coming up with terrible conditions for working women. It's a pity I cannot remember the details, for instance when it came to maternity leave, it was going to reduce the months we had negotiated. We had demanded 6 months paid maternity leave even though we never won because of the UIF, the

UIF would pay part of the amount and the company would pay the rest. But it used to be such a problem because companies would say, where there are more women they would say do we expect companies to encourage women to fall pregnant, they assumed that it would be interpreted in that way, that if women have these rights, it means they will know that by nature they have to give birth and they can give birth as much as they want as long as they are protected. This would secure their jobs and they will be paid when they are bringing up their kids, and then management would ask us who is going to be working in their spaces when they are on maternity leave. We would suggest that they can employ part time workers to come and work. Six months is not long, even the company's contribution was so little. Some women had to come back before the six months expired. By demanding the maternity benefit, they thought we were crazy by the demand – because the women would just come back because they couldn't stay away from work that long, the income was less. Some of women were single, and in those years if you were single you were perceived as not secured.

This was one of the things that was going to be worsened by the new labour law, I can't remember the other stuff that was in the bill. We mobilised as many women and formed the COSATU women's forum and launched it in April 1990. It had existed for some time but individual unions had adopted this. I'm sure that you know that unions affiliated to COSATU are autonomous, its affiliate has its own constitution, it can run its business on its own. All those affiliates their main goal is better working conditions and a living wage. So then we would come together, all of the unions that have women members and work under the Women Forum umbrella. That is how I got involved, it started as being conscientised by women

issues in my union and then I joined the other affiliates and then we then formed this.

At an earlier stage, I was the chairperson before the actual launch, I was appointed the chairperson of .., Wits Region, that is Jo'burg, Pretoria, which is now called Gauteng. It was then called Wits Region of COSATU. So we got together with unions like SACCAWU, at the time it was called CCAWUSA, NUMSA, Chemical Workers Industrial Union, Sweet Food before it became FAWU, you know, all those unions we formed, I almost forgot the Textile Workers Industrial Union (National Union of Textile Workers (NUTW), how can I forget this union that was women dominated where the late Joyce Gwadi was a member. Transport and General Workers Union consisted of cleaners and then there was the Domestic Workers Union, it was also one of the unions. That's the long and short of it, unless you have questions.

Facilitator: ja, just follow up questions. How was the Women's Forum received, the Women's Committee by both the employer and the men at the time?

Respondent: The Women Forum didn't go to the factories, it was a union thing, but it conscientised and mobilised women about their rights and then it made them more sharper at the time of negotiations at their work places. As I was saying earlier on, men would make a mockery out of it saying that .., like for instance those comrades who would say "comrade Refilwe I can see what you are doing here but my wife would never be part of this and my sister". I would tease them and ask them, do you know by the way under what conditions is working under, your cousin, your daughter, your sister, do you know. I would say I am not doing this in a

way of saying .., I'm trying to create a rift between your wife and you but you know just to let her know because your wife, and yourself you are bringing about another human being to life and you wouldn't like your daughter, your niece, your sister to be treated the way women are treated now. Because you know people would look at it in a very shallow way to say these women, especially like me, I was not married, they would think that we are teaching the women to be disrespectful to their husbands. We were just conscientising women about their rights and that is it. They used to think this is just a waste of time and it's not going to help. They would say to themselves that by the time she gets home she will obey me as her husband. So it's pointless for me to tell them. I would get to that point of if they knew the working conditions of their wives, daughters, nieces etc. Would you expect your daughter to be dragged around by boys? It doesn't end in the work situation, it goes beyond. We used to say why is there this kind of behaviour by our society, it's because we women bring our girl kids up in a way that boys can just go and play and the girl must make fire, clean and cook, that is how the boys are brought up. (phone rang)

Facilitator: anyway, you were still talking about the fact that COSATU had to somehow accommodate the Women's Forum one way or another?

Respondent: I don't think they had a choice at the time, and then it spread and became a national forum. It had office bearers who were elected nationally. At the time I was based in the region, I didn't go national but sometimes I used to attend national meetings. In fact through this women forum, we managed to then work with the women's movement at the time, this is when the ANC was banned, the Federation of Transvaal Women, some of the members were Jessie Duarte, Susan



Shabangu, Sister Bernard Nxube, MmaSisulu, you name them, the comrades of the time, Zeni Shongweni, Firoza Adams, the one who died in Cape Town immediately after she got into parliament. We then worked together to an extent that a month after the COSATU Forum was launched, because you remember I said there was the whole issue of the labour bill, that there was going to be a new labour law that was going to oppress women more than ever before. We then organised a big march on the 28 April, 28 days after the launch. Our demands were taken to Jeppe Police Station in Johannesburg. It was a big march, our slogan at the time was "Women Want Freedom Now". We have those t-shirts printed like that. From FEDTRAW, the women who were asked to .., as the COSATU leadership we had to lead the march, we invited MmaSisulu, we invited Jessie Duarte, we invited Sister Bernard Ncube, so they formed the chain and we went to Jeppe Police Station. The Regional Secretary at the time was comrade Amos Masondo, the chairperson was Andrew Zulu and they were so supportive. By that time we got so much support from our male counterparts. In the eyes of the public, the men supported us. We used to meet at night, remember we didn't have cell phones, we didn't have cars at the time but we were so determined. We launched on 1 April and then we had this big march, and also because of the situation at the time, the un-governability of the country and especially in 1990 the movement was just un-banned. This had worked since the 1980s when there was a lot of resistance against apartheid and such things. The whole issue of workers rights, it was not just workers' rights, it was the whole issue of apartheid, why were black women or black workers working under those conditions. It was not just pure working conditions, whether a person liked it or not, hence we used to say triple oppression because of the colour of women, they were oppressed because of their colour, even

if they are walking in the streets, in their houses and work they were oppressed everywhere. It was more than that.

Facilitator: Did you make serious headways, and what were the weaknesses of the structure when you look back.

Respondent:

The challenges we faced, first and foremost, we did not say shop stewards only, we just said women, shop stewards would get time off through the recognition agreements that we used to sign with the employers, to undergo some training and all such things. We started firstly with shop stewards but as you remember when I told you that women, even though they would be more in numbers, they would elect men to be shop stewards. So we had to go through them even though they were not shop stewards. It was as broad as that, the challenge was the times and the days of meeting with women .., when a woman is not at work she is working at home. So it was so difficult but we managed because those women would sacrifice because they wanted to know more about those rights. We would meet sometimes after hours, remember I told you that women would be sitting there worrying what time they would arrive home, they didn't have cars in those days and would use public transport and it would be dangerous for them to walk at night because they are women. Some of them were scared of their partners and husbands. Some of them would steal time to attend the meetings, they sacrificed a lot to attend the meetings. So those were some of the challenges we had .., even though the structure was there, they were not free. Sometimes we would call meetings on Saturday, and Saturday is the time when they have to do their washing, to go shopping and attend funerals and attend to family gatherings. I am proud that we managed irrespective of the challenges.

Facilitator: As far as you are concerned, the chauvinistic attitude of men back then, even today, but we will come to that. Were they willing to change or was there a sense of people wanting to change or was there resistance?

Respondent: they were not the same as I was saying, for instance, especially the office bearers of the region, the Masondos, the Zulus, they were so supportive, I'm thinking of the time when we were preparing for this march. They would stay with us in the offices, they would assist us with pamphlets etc. even the programme of the big march of 28 April, they were the regional executive. I am not sure whether they were forced because of the positions but you know they really were supportive. Of course it was not the support we expected from everybody, across the board it was not like that. I mean I told you the type of comments they made, and I'm telling you about comrades who were shop stewards, not just ordinary comrades, who expected to understand and assist us in factories to conscientise these women, so (interruption) – you can ask me other questions I cannot remember where we were

Facilitator: you were saying that you somehow managed to make some head ways into the man's world in terms of them accepting you at the time

Respondent: No, in fact, I think it did bring about understanding but to some men not to everyone of them. But as time went on we managed to get support from some, I am not sure whether they were obligated to support us or what, because of that whole issue that maybe they were worried that people would say how can you want to be free when your

counterparts are not free. But we did get some support. In South Africa if the term “culture” is mentioned, it refers to women's oppression. If someone says our culture, there are problems already. Culture in South Africa does not favour women. In some cases they cannot even explain the reasoning behind the culture. For instance Father Mzamane from Thema once said “if a woman has lost her husband she must sit there alone, drink the medicines etc, and when a man loses his wife he can go out and do whatever he wants, whereas a woman is forced to mourn with black clothes and is treated as if she has an infectious disease”. I told my sister who lost her husband, I told her that she is fortunate because she has her own car, whatever she wants to do she gets into her car and go. I know of women here in Gauteng who are not allowed to stand, or use public transport, it is like she has an infectious disease, where must she go. My mother used to say to us before she died, she hated a man who didn't want his wife to work. She would say what if the husband dies and the woman will be forced to go and look for a job whilst in mourning because she doesn't have anyone to support. These are some of our so called cultures that oppress women day in day out. Girls cannot eat eggs, drink milk for whatever reason, girls cannot dress in a certain way, you cannot wear a short dress because you are a woman. Women are not allowed to wear pants because they are women. I buy the clothes myself and nobody is contributing. Once people talk about culture I know it is oppression.

I once asked some guy why he was saying a woman cannot wear tight pants. What are we as women supposed to say when men are wearing tight pants. A woman must always be dictated to. Some women support this because the very same women bring us up, girls are expected to prepare themselves to become wives, all those things. Our society needs

to start teaching our kids that the boy and the girl child are both equal. The sex is immaterial. Girls are expected to wash dishes, clean whilst boys can just go and play. A girl child gets toys like dolls, and the boy gets a car .., that is why I am saying women cannot change the society alone, we need the support of men, our male counterparts need to buy in, sincerely. In the job market in most cases women are told that they are not experienced enough, Mama Ivy Matsepe-Casaburri the SABC did not expect her to run the SABC because she's a woman. Always first woman. Women are not treated like human beings. Some women are afraid to speak in meetings because they lack confidence, their self esteem is killed. When we had the women forums this is what we were trying to do, to encourage the women, to empower them so that they can speak out whenever and where ever. They are just used to be in the kitchen and take their frustration out on the kids. If the husband is upset with her about something she will take it out on the children, they are not allowed to speak up against their husbands. Women are not free to express themselves

Facilitator: mental enslavement

Respondent: yes this is where the mental enslavement starts. When you ask a woman where she is working, she says I don't work. You ask her what does she do during the day. They will say I wake up in the morning and do a,b,c,d, e and f. You don't get paid for the labour that you are contributing in your house and yet you say you are unemployed. These are some of the things that a woman is content with being housewives and they accept it. In the past women were not encouraged to get a good education because they were being prepared to be enslaved by men

Facilitator: that's true. Is there another thing that you think, when looking back that should have been done better by the Committee of Women, any particular thing that you can think of?

Respondent: I think, in fact the other thing I didn't speak about is the resources, I didn't have resources, remember I told you that when we were preparing for that march, we used taxis at night, there were no cars, even if the cars were there they were used by organisers, they would use the cars for transporting workers if there was a need. For women they didn't care, they would just see to finish. The technology was also not there, those women who were at work, they were not allowed to use company phones. I am not sure if things could have been done differently because of the conditions that prevailed at the time. We are strong. I really am not sure if there was .., we tried our best.

Facilitator: what about specific courses, training for the women?

Respondent: when we called meetings, we would also give training to the women, but there was no time for training. Women shop stewards were able to attend courses, unfortunately the courses could not be spread across other women because they were just ordinary members and were having problems in their homes. The advantage with the shop steward was that you could call them for training, but at the same time it was difficult to separate them from their male counterparts especially if it was a mixed factory. It was easier to deal with women who were in the majority in the factories, a factory that was dominated by men it was not so easy

Facilitator: earlier on you talked about that you established yourself well in KZN, was there no tension between you and UWUSA, as you were invading their own space?

Respondent: No UWUSA came after us, we just ignored it, in fact what it did, it divided the workers in political affiliation. UWUSA was part of IFP and we .., as COSATU, we saw it as a broad church. Whatever political affiliation, at the end of the day you are a worker, you are in the trade union movement because of the working conditions and wages purely, even though the whole issue was about apartheid, that is how we organised, as if it's poor working conditions and wages. So it was only then when UWUSA .., Inkatha realised that the mat has been put under our feet. UWUSA did not have a good base, it just died a natural death.

Facilitator: The Women's Forum that you talked about earlier, did it achieve its goals or objectives?

Respondent: Partly it did because the Act which was going to be put in place at the time was not withdrawn but it was delayed. Unfortunately it was during the time of the un-banning and then there was this whole transition in our country and I don't think that the bill was enacted. Everything started moving towards 1994, the negotiations and all that. Remember it was already 1990, of course it was something that was building up from the late 1980s. I can't remember what happened to the bill

Facilitator: any other strategies other than marches that you guys employed to ensure that certain demands were met?

Respondent: there used to be a lot of strikes in the firms – it was not easy for women. What we used to do is we used to encourage women members to attend community organisations, for example for them to become members so those were the ways we used to integrate working women to forecast. During those years other people were called workerist, charterist, whereby the workers would be told by some union officials that here in the trade union movement, we are here purely about your working conditions. You do not involve yourselves with riots in the townships. For instance PWAU was very upfront. If you are at work you are there because of the oppression in our country, if it was not for that you wouldn't be working, you would be having your own means of living. So we can never divorce the struggle in the firms from the one in the township. So we used to encourage the workers to attend. At the time there were street committees and organisations like FEDRAW, UDF at the time. We used to tell our workers to get involved in what is going on around them in the township.

Facilitator: post 1994 or 1990, what were the expectations from the women's perspective and were those expectations met?

Respondent: the expectation was that women must be involved in all the structures, I think that was also why some of us were voted in to be members of parliament. Ja because we were saying women must be in all structures, we will no longer stand the whole issue of a woman's place is in the kitchen. That is why we get excited when we see women entrepreneurs, women in all the other spheres of society, their involvement because this is what we wished for, we wanted them to play a leading role. That is why we encouraged women to become shop stewards, if



you don't get involved who is going to fight your battles, the men will not fight your battles.

Facilitator: so when you look back was it worth it to involve yourself in women struggles, or would you have lived a different life preferably? When you look back was it worth it to take this direction to get involved in women issue struggles?

Respondent: ja, I mean I don't think I would be where I am, I don't think so, in fact I think it was a good thing that I worked for the trade union movement because if I had not, I am not sure I would have achieved as much as I did, the independent thinking, I don't think so.

Facilitator: Is there anything that you think is important that we did not talk about?

Respondent: I think the problem amongst women is that they get jealous when they see another woman's capabilities, that is one of the things that drags women down unless they are strong. We are so jealous of each other, we do not want to see another woman succeeding, it's a terrible disease amongst women. For instance I met Refilwe in the trade union movement, I don't know how she was brought up, how she was conscientised etc, and then when she succeeds and I see other people voting her in I get jealous and say nasty things about her. This is killing the women – as a result the very same men use us. We will never win with this attitude. That is our cancer. Very few women who wishes other women well, that is why some women become dominant to men, they go around with men just to undermine the intelligence of other women or their capabilities. This is a killer to women and it is so common unfortunately.

This will make us not to progress as women. Maybe our children will do it better, the so-called model C's because they see things differently compared to us, because they are brought up differently. They will definitely see different to us. Sometimes we become jealous because you dress better than me, are we in a fashion parade, we know that whole issue of the importance of being presentable, but to be jealous.

Facilitator: That's very sad

Respondent: ja that is what leads to women not becoming independent, and men capitalise on them, this is pure divide and rule.

Facilitator: Any closing word Mama

Respondent: I just wish, especially the latter I've spoken about can be cured, I'm not sure how, because once that thing gets erased from women's minds, they will become very independent. I used to say to women you don't know how much power you have as women, we bring life to earth, we bring them up, you won't have a president, teacher etc., we bring them to life, we can use that influence to make them what we want them to be in their future. Why don't we use that power? We have the natural power and we don't use it. It's just too bad.

Facilitator: anyway, thanks for your time

Respondent: I just hope I have given you part of what you wanted. I hope so.

**END**

