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Gender transformation in the work place and the role of trade unions in South Africa: A case study of rand water

Quanson, Libanus

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ABSTRACT

The central point in this research is that some public-sector organisations are making accelerated progress in gender transformation in the post-apartheid South African workplace. The research showed that Rand Water was previously a male-dominated workplace with a strong patriarchal culture. It also showed that Rand Water took a cue from the various legislative provisions of the democratic era and made conscious efforts towards general workplace transformation, with a profound commitment to gender transformation from 2007 onward. This success story of Rand Water and gender transformation was linked to union, worker and management partnership and participation in the workplace. The major partners in the transformation process were the South African Municipal Workers' Union (SAMWU) through the individual and collective contributions of its members.

The research adopted a qualitative research approach, and used structured, semi-structured and in-depth interviews with 26 respondents from Rand Water, SAMWU and the South African Department of Labour in Johannesburg. The study investigated the sociological experiences, employment profiles and gendered perceptions of the participants. The findings indicate that although the respondents' experiences and perceptions were diverse, both men and women appreciated the gender transformation process at Rand Water. However, there were different views that cut across gender, race and occupation levels. Significantly, the findings also illustrate a heterogeneity of views in terms of how gender transformation is understood. Nevertheless, there was an overwhelming belief that accelerated gender transformation processes are going on at Rand Water because of the promulgation of the Employment Equity Act of 1998. The study also reveals that SAMWU members are the major partners in the process through worker mobilisation.

In conclusion the study shows that the role of trade unions in the gender transformation process is crucial. Trade union contributions to the process would be more effective if unions could be restructured with a focus on improving internal structural democracy. By so doing, both women and men would experience equitable representation so that a non-gendered solid front could be used to propel the transformation process.