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"Struggling to get the position and struggling to keep it": how women become trade union leaders

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to understand the journey through which women travel in order to become trade union leaders in an environment that is male dominated. Through an analysis of the exceptional women who are trade union leaders, it looked into their motivations to become trade union leaders, the steps they take, the struggles they face, and the mechanism which they employ to successfully overcome the barriers to their rise to top hierarchies of trade unions. This qualitative study identified the limiting factors to women's involvement in trade unions as leaders and simultaneously identified the positive forces that support them the opportunities that exist for trade unions to foster and strengthen the integration of women leaders.

Participants in the study were trade union officials from COSATU affiliates: nine were women with leadership positions at national level and six were gender coordinators from the trade unions (one was a man). The women leaders had experience of trade union activism for a number of years ranging from four to twenty-eight. The study employed an in depth interview method where all the interviews with participants were carried out face to face. There were two separate interview schedules; one for the women leaders and one for gender coordinators.

This study contributed to the body of existing knowledge about women in trade unions. It confirms other studies' findings that in addition to women's personal attributes there are opportunities for trade unions to promote women's leadership but they remain weak in implementing strategies for increasing the participation of women as leaders and are hampered by the persistence of male culture and bureaucracy which disadvantages women.