



**This Women's month, we do not celebrate. We mobilize.
11 August
Press Statement**

The National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa (NUMSA) will spend this Women's month honouring the memory of courageous women of 1956. On the 9th of August 1956 more than 20 000 women marched to the Union Buildings in Pretoria to reject the dehumanizing Dompas system. The pass laws were used as a tool of racial control and humiliation. The march was led by militant revolutionaries like Rahima Moosa, Lillian Ngonyi, Sophia Williams-De Bruyn to name but a few. These brave leaders defied the brutal might of the Apartheid state, and they did so with babies on their backs, and fire in their hearts. Their cry "*Wathint' abafazi, wathint' imbokodo*" still echoes across generations. They confronted the apartheid system by protesting against the Dompas which was designed to crush Black people. The pass laws intensified the daily violence inflicted on the working class and women stood face to face against the oppressor as part of the struggle to overthrow the system. They were not passive victims, they were architects of resistance.

It has been more than 60 years since and unfortunately, not enough has changed for the Black and African working class majority. Apartheid may be off the statute books, but capitalism, it's its successor, has found new ways to oppress the Black and African working class. Today, wealth not race is the gatekeeper to dignity. The working class majority are locked out of quality education, healthcare, and housing. The ANC has failed to implement radical policies to genuinely transform the lives of the majority. The working class, especially Black women, are still denied the fruits of freedom. In South Africa Black women suffer triple oppression because they are oppressed for their race, gender and their class. If one looks at the statistics, Black women continue to be the lowest paid in the workplace, compared to any other racial group; they suffer the worst physical and emotional abuse because of high levels of femicide and GBV; and they suffer more than any other group when it comes to unemployment and poverty.

South Africa today is the most unequal society on earth. A handful of billionaires including Johan Rupert, the Oppenheimers, Patrice Motsepe and our very own President Cyril Ramaphosa, hoard obscene wealth whilst millions starve. Their luxury is built on our suffering. They are deaf to the cries of the poor and blind to the desperation of mothers who cannot feed their children.

The Government of National Unity has continued in this vein. It was implemented to serve the markets in order to increase the wealth of the minority at the expense of the masses. The GNU is a coalition designed to entrench the power of capital. It protects wealth, not lives.

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It was with this in mind the Gender structure in Hlanganani hosted a Women's' Day event on Saturday 9th August to educate and empower. The theme was, "*Invest in women and break barriers*".

The 2nd Deputy President Puleng Phaka gave the keynote address. She focused on the role played by women in mining particularly the Marikana massacre of 2012. Her input was based on research by Asanda Bhenya who wrote about the role that women played in supporting striking miners in Marikana, and also how they organized marches to highlight the desperate conditions facing the community. They also gave testimony to the Farlam Commission of enquiry and attended the hearings on a daily basis.

The 2nd Deputy President Puleng Phaka also encouraged women to be visible in their communities and to be responsive to the suffering of other women, both in the workplace and the community. She also called on them not to shy away from taking up leadership roles at work, and also in the union. NUMSA needs to grow and the union can benefit from more women joining the organisation. The union is currently engaged in Shopsteward elections. She encouraged women to participate and not to be afraid to participate in leadership positions at all levels in the organisation,

“Let us not say we are not ready or use the fact that we have children as a reason not to contest. Members elect you because they have faith in you and see the power that you have. Once elected, do not let the members down, serve them diligently. It is a privilege to be a Shopsteward, it is not a chieftaincy. You must serve members”.

The 2nd Deputy President encouraged all gender structures to organise events and activities, not just in the month of August, but for the remainder of the year in order to strengthen its structures, and also, to build the union. The Gender structure must be a space to empower and mentor women into leadership. It must also be a resource to help Metalworkers and their families with day to day societal challenges, by offering information on relationship support; parenting; drug addiction and other societal issues.

Various speakers gave input including the Deputy General Secretary of SAFTU comrade Nontembeko Luzipo who gave a very personal account of how she survived sexual harassment. The SAFTU DGS also commented on the disturbing comments made by the Justice Selby Mbenenge the Judge President of The Eastern Cape, who as part of his input in the sexual harassment enquiry against him, has made disturbing claims to suggest that Xhosa culture condones unwanted sexual attention from a man. She remarked that such comments reflect the untransformed nature of the judiciary if a Judge President can attempt to twist culture in order to justify unwanted sexual advances from the opposite sex.

The Deputy General Secretary of the SRWP Dr. Vashna Jagernauth focused on the role that women have played historically in the struggle for freedom. She reminded delegates that South African women have been at the forefront of gender struggles against apartheid and colonialism for centuries. The first march against pass laws was led by Black and Coloured women in Bloemfontein in 1913 against official regulations which forced women to carry documentation of formal employment and restrict their movement. The Pass laws were enforced to control Black and Coloured women who were providing domestic services in what was then the Boer Republic of the Free State.

The Founder of Women in Automotive, Yandisa Mdlalose spoke about networking and entrepreneurship and the role that women can play in business as corporate leaders. She is a long time NUMSA member and she encouraged women in Auto to organise in order to be able to influence policy to ensure greater participation in the sector.

We also heard from Vusiwe Mdlalo from Kungawobantu, which is an organization that focuses on training. She gave input on combating sexual harassment in the workplace as well as giving a detailed account of how women can protect themselves legally, by outlining their rights, when confronted with such issues.

Delegates also heard from comrade Nicholas Mofokeng a NUMSA Shopsteward who spoke about the LGBTQIA+ community and the challenges they face in the community and the workplace. A call was made for greater solidarity between unions and the LGBTQIA+ community because they continue to experience daily discrimination in the workplace, as a result of their sexuality.

NUMSA wishes to thank the regional leadership of the Gender structure and the ROB's of Hlanganani for hosting a wonderful, educational and informative event. The union is committed to hosting and participating in a series of events in the month of August and beyond, in order to have a focused attention on gender issues.

Meanwhile NUMSA continues to honour the women of 1956 by inspiring and empowering the women of today. We salute the mothers who fight for survival, the workers who demand dignity and better conditions, and the young women who refuse to be silenced.

Ends.

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