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NETWORK FOR EQUITY IN TRANSITIONS FROM FOSSIL FUELS

CASE STUDY #3

COSATU'S GENDER-JUST TRANSITION TOOLKIT

Embedding Gender Equality in South Africa's Labour-Led Transition

South Africa generates about 85 percent of its electricity from coal, a sector employing tens of thousands of people directly and indirectly. The transition to renewables poses serious economic risks, mainly for workers and communities reliant on those jobs. Women workers, particularly in mining, agriculture, and unpaid care work, remain excluded from formal employment, union leadership, and policy dialogues. Conventional transition planning often overlooks gender dynamics and reinforces existing patterns of social exclusion.



This case study contributes to a broader understanding of gender-transformative approaches to just transitions through grassroots initiatives in the global South. It demonstrates how centring women's leadership in energy transitions creates more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

Introduction and Context

South Africa generates about 85 percent of its electricity from coal, a sector employing tens of thousands of people directly and indirectly. The transition to renewables poses serious economic risks, mainly for workers and communities reliant on those jobs.¹ Women workers, particularly in mining, agriculture, and unpaid care work, remain excluded from formal employment, union leadership, and policy dialogues. Conventional transition planning often overlooks gender dynamics and reinforces existing patterns of social exclusion.

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The Initiative: Building a Gender-Transformative Approach

Recognizing these gaps, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), representing 1.8 million workers across 21 affiliate unions, recognized early that just transition planning in the country, particularly within union and labour spaces, was proceeding without adequate attention to the gendered implications of such significant shifts. In response, COSATU developed groundbreaking tools and strategies to ensure that South Africa's energy transition advances rather than undermines gender equality. In particular, COSATU developed a toolkit to help integrate gender equity into collective bargaining, workplace strategies, and policy dialogue. The development of the toolkit involved extensive consultation with over 500 women workers across coal-dependent provinces, documenting their experiences, concerns, and visions for transformation. This bottom-up approach ensured that the tools addressed real workplace and community challenges rather than abstract policy concepts.

These efforts included training over 2,000 union representatives, advocating for gender-inclusive policies, and promoting public ownership of renewable energy. The toolkit includes gender impact assessments for key economic sectors and practical guidance for integrating gender into collective bargaining and workplace strategies.

Key Components and Innovations

COSATU's toolkit provides practical resources for integrating gender perspectives into just transition policies at multiple levels, including the federation level, provincial level, union and sectoral level, and the workplace and local level:²

- **Sectoral Gender Impact Assessments**

Detailed analyses of five key sectors map the gendered impacts of transitions. For mining, the toolkit reveals that while women comprise only 12 percent of the formal workforce, they constitute 68 percent of informal economy workers in mining towns.³ Each assessment includes specific recommendations for gender-transformative interventions.

- **Collective Bargaining Templates**

Model clauses ensure that transition agreements address gender-specific needs, including:

- Guaranteed quotas for women in green jobs training.
- Childcare support during reskilling programmes.
- Recognition of informal sector workers in transition planning.
- Protection against gender-based violence in new workplaces.

- **Organizing Strategies**

The toolkit provides guidance for building women's leadership in transition processes, including establishing women's committees, conducting gender-sensitive consultations, and creating safe spaces for women workers to articulate their needs and aspirations.

- **Intersectional Framework**

Recognizing that gender intersects with race, class, and geography, the toolkit incorporates tools for analyzing multiple forms of discrimination and designing inclusive responses. COSATU's approach makes use of available data to highlight implications of inaction for affected communities by characterizing the vulnerabilities of localities by race, gender, income level, settlement type, household size, employment status, education level, and grant dependency. This data-driven intersectional analysis specifically accounts for the compounded vulnerabilities faced by Black women, low-income workers, and those in informal settlements—groups that have historically been excluded from formal labour protections and union leadership.

Gender-Transformative Elements

- **Intersectional Approach**

Addresses barriers faced by women in male-dominated sectors, informal workers, and unpaid care providers.

- **Agency and Representation**

Elevates women unionists as policy contributors at national and international just transition fora.

- **Institutional Change**

Integrates gender provisions into South Africa's National Just Transition Framework and union contracts, covering over 150,000 workers.

- **Power Redistribution**

Advances participatory policy development with women-led advocacy across COSATU affiliates.

- **Capacity Building**

Develops tools and training for educators, organizers, and shop stewards on gender-just transitions.

Transformative Outcomes

COSATU's Gender Toolkit has contributed to a shift in how gender equality is approached within South Africa's just transition efforts. The initiative supports the integration of gender considerations into COSATU's broader climate policy work and aligns with the country's Just Transition Framework. At the institutional level, the toolkit promotes the inclusion of gender-responsive provisions in union policies and collective bargaining processes. It also fosters the establishment of women's committees, awareness programmes, and participatory structures across union, provincial, and workplace levels.

By providing concrete tools, such as training materials, model clauses, and sectoral assessments, the toolkit enables unions to embed gender considerations in transition planning. It encourages increased women's leadership within union structures and highlights the need to include informal and care workers, who are often overlooked in formal planning processes. The emphasis on intersectionality and alliance-building across sectors lays the foundation for a more inclusive and democratic transition process.

Challenges and Future Direction

The implementation of these projects faces ongoing challenges due to patriarchal attitudes within unions and workplaces that require sustained efforts to ensure cultural change. Moreover, the informal economy, where many women work, remains difficult to organize and include in formal transition processes. Resources for gender-specific programmes compete with other transition priorities. COSATU continues to advocate for mandatory gender budgeting in all transition initiatives and stronger accountability mechanisms. The federation is now developing sector-specific implementation guides and working to expand the toolkit's approach to other African countries facing similar transitions.

Footnotes

- ¹ Prater, Tom. 2021. "The Carbon Brief Profile: South Africa." Carbon Brief. April 26, 2021. <https://www.carbonbrief.org/the-carbon-brief-profile-south-africa/>.
- ² COSATU, Blueprint to Structure Project: Gender Toolkit, n.d., <https://mediadon.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/158878-COSATU-Just-Transition-Gender-Toolkit.pdf>.
- ³ Women in Mining. 2024. "Breaking Barriers, Building Bridges: Empowering Young Women in Mining With WiM's Strategy." Women in Mining. https://www.mineralscouncil.org.za/womeninmining/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/WIM-June-Newsletter_V2.pdf.

About this Case Study

This case study examines gender-transformative approaches to just transitions through grassroots initiatives in the global South. It was produced by GI-ESCR and UNRISD to demonstrate how centring women's leadership in energy transitions creates more equitable and sustainable outcomes.

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