

South African Union Of Students (SAUS)

Document Four

Gender Policy

Introduction

Guided by the vision of a society free of sexism, racism, class exploitation, and other forms of oppression, we commit ourselves, as SAUS, to working for the equal participation of men and women in all aspects of the life of the union and its affiliate SRCs, in the sphere of higher education, and in society generally. To this end, we, as SAUS, commit to working to remove all forms of gender oppression and sexism that exist in the union, in higher education, and in society. In particular, the position of black women will be prioritised in this work, noting that there has been the systematic exclusion of black women from economic and political processes in South Africa, and from pursuing higher education. In making proposals for the transformation of higher education, SAUS commits itself not only to advancing the position of women in the sector, but also towards enhancing the development of curricula and methods of learning and teaching in the interests of women's development and gender equality.

This policy represents the start of a process towards clarifying an approach to the struggle for women's empowerment and gender equality in the union, in higher education, and in society. As such, it is open to critique and to change, and is a living document to which all members should actively contribute particularly by translating it into meaningful action. It is also a document that both prescribes ways for tackling gender issues and flags issues for further research, investigation, debate and discussion.

While this document gives priority to the position of women students, it is hoped that both men and women will make it their responsibility to advance the policies and proposals put forward here. And, that gender will not be seen as a 'women's issue' but become a central part of the discussions and life of the union as seen by both men and women.

Understanding Gender Oppression & Exploitation

Too often gender issues are viewed as 'women's issues'. As SAUS, we need to guard against such tendencies as they reflect misunderstandings about what gender is all about. While use of the word 'sex' most often refers to biological differences between males and females, 'gender' is used to refer to the roles and responsibilities that are socially ascribed to these different sexes. Gender differences are therefore not natural, but taught through processes of socialisation led by institutions such as the family, the church, and the school. In different societies gender relations (relations between men and women) have been structured differently to produce different levels of inequality between men

and women. Gender relations are thus relations of power. In capitalist society, gender relations historically serve to (re)produce a gendered division of labour in which the reproductive labour provided by women in the home goes unpaid and serves to bolster the exploitation of men in the workplace.

Gender roles are expectations of how men and women should behave in ways that are defined by society. For example, men are supposed to be natural leaders, decision-makers and providers; women are expected to be caregivers, supporters and followers of men. Gender relations in our society are defined by the capitalist-patriarchy in which we live. In the current context the two systems reinforce each other, which means patriarchy cannot be resolved without also addressing capitalist relations.

Patriarchy refers to the system of male domination and control that exists at all levels of society. Capitalism is patriarchal because it has a material basis in the sexual division of labour, exploitation of women's unpaid labour and their subordination in the household. It is supported by a patriarchal ideology that sees women as inferior to men. In terms of this sexual hierarchy, men and women are accorded the different roles described above. For a variety of reasons, women co-operate with this system. We know, for example, that without the co-operation of slaves, slavery would not have lasted for so long. Similarly, women have internalised the system and its values, and in some cases, particular women benefit from it. A complex set of relationships keeps their co-operation. In order to retain privilege, women are continually renegotiating their bargaining power, sometimes at the cost of other women. Examples of this include women who treat their sons better than their daughters, deprive their daughters of education, restrict their freedom and mistreat their daughters-in-law.

Patriarchy manifests itself in all aspects of society, including the economy, political institutions and ideology, the legal system, religion, social and cultural institutions, such as the family, the media, the education system, and so forth. The nature of patriarchal relations varies from society to society. At the same time women's oppression takes various forms depending on race, class, religion, marital status and age.

Capitalism is a mode of production based on private property where one class – the bourgeoisie – owns and controls the means of production, and the working class owns nothing but its labour power. Today, capitalism benefits from the oppression of women under patriarchy, by virtue of the fact that employers pay low wages to women because of patriarchal ideology, which sees society in terms of the nuclear, heterosexist model of the family with the male being viewed as the breadwinner.

Race and gender oppression are not about mere prejudice, but ultimately about using power and control in the interests of capital. Apartheid capitalism also benefited from women's oppression through the migrant labour system that separated men from their families and paid African men low wages on the basis that African women were caring for their families through subsistence farming in

the homelands. In addition, large numbers of African women worked (and continue to work) as domestic workers and cleaners under extremely exploitative conditions. While apartheid thrived on a system of cheap labour that relied on the exploitation of African men and the super-exploitation of African women, today's neoliberal economy continues to make women (in particular black women) the 'shock absorbers' of the effects of policies that have further eroded the protections of the poor. It is our position, as SAUS, that any programme of transformation and redress must put women (in particular black women) at its centre. This does not make gender issues 'women's issues', but points to the need to prioritise the redress of women in the struggle for gender equality.

In developing a gender policy, SAUS needs to prioritise women's development and empowerment as part of a broader strategy of education and awareness about gender issues targeting both men and women, and campaign and advocacy work aimed at advancing the struggle for gender equality in the union, in higher education, and in society.

Key to the success of the implementation of any policy will be the degree to which men and women accept the need to change. While incorporating the politically correct language into our policy may be easy, translating these paper commitments into reality will be much more difficult. This document attempts to provide ways for SAUS to grapple honestly with the problems that arise when discussing gender relations amongst students. While this document offers broad parameters for approaching gender in SAUS, it is important to try to understand what it means for male and female students in their daily lives. The challenge for SAUS is to make the commitments in this document translatable in the everyday practices of students.

Broad Objectives Of A Gender Policy

Women's Development & Empowerment

SAUS commits itself to working towards the development of the skills and capacity for work and leadership amongst black women students, noting their systematic marginalisation and exclusion from education under apartheid. To this end, SAUS will undertake campaigns to encourage institutions of higher learning to prioritise the holistic development of black women academics in all fields, and elaborate programmes internal to SAUS for the targeted development of women student activists and leaders.

Gender Education & Awareness

SAUS commits itself to developing a programme of education and awareness about gender issues for both male and female students. The research and policy unit should investigate other existing programmes that could be used in developing our own approaches.

SAUS will also encourage institutions of higher learning to become more proactive in advancing gender equality in all aspects of their lives.

Gendered Institutional Change

SAUS will campaign for institutional managements to craft programmes to effect gendered change on campuses. The research and policy unity should conduct studies to inform such campaigns.

SAUS will actively seek ways of transforming its own structure and policies to improve the position of women and to advance gender equality. This will include the development of a code of conduct that includes mechanisms for apprehending and dealing with cases of sexism and sexual harassment, as well as forms of gender violence, such as rape. SAUS will actively strive to engender a culture of non-sexism and commitment to making gender equality a meaningful practice and value. Women's empowerment and development must be seen as vital to meeting this objective.

Making Knowledge Production Speak To Gender Concerns

Noting the significant role played by higher education in the process of socialisation and the imparting of knowledge to young people, SAUS will campaign strongly for curricula in higher learning to integrate gender concerns and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women.

SAUS will also dedicate some time towards advancing the position of women in areas of study currently still dominated by men e.g. engineering.

Strategies For Gendered Change

Women's Development In SAUS

Several experiences show the value of separate spaces for women to come together to receive training and to share experiences, ideas and approaches. Not only do women become more confident in such spaces, but they are also able to learn and share in a less hostile and competitive environment. In trying to develop women's leadership in a country and sector in which women have been systematically denied the potential of leadership and activism, it also makes sense to target women to be trained in order to begin fulfilling these roles. Under the leadership of the National Governance & Welfare Officer, SAUS will establish a group of 20 women students (leaders and potential leaders) to receive targeted training over the period of a year.

Training will include courses to be provided in three block modules over the year. The first module will include an introduction to basic gender concepts and analysis; understanding higher education from a gender perspective; and understanding student activism and organising from a gender perspective. The

second module will comprise basic organisational skills; leadership skills; communication and negotiation skills; and facilitation and training skills. The final module will introduce the group to basic research skills; writing skills as well as debates and discussions around transformation and policy formulation in higher education. Each module will be designed to run over five days. The courses will be developed in such a way that the experiences of the women students receiving the training will be allowed to shape and drive the overall learning experience. Built into the courses (which will take the form of workshops) will be an element of documenting and refining SAUS' understanding of the gender-related problems faced by students. The information collected from this training programme will feed into a union-wide process of policy development around these problems. In this way, for example, SAUS' policy on sexual harassment will be refined through the experiences, thoughts and ideas shared during training sessions of this group, together with experiences shared in other workshops and discussions regarding gender.

Through such targeted and focused training, it is hoped that a group of competent women activists and leaders will emerge within the union to take up gender-related concerns, and to participate in all aspects of union life. It is also envisaged that, in the course of this year of training, members of the group will become confident enough to conduct basic gender training for other groups of students at campus level, thus sharing the knowledge and experiences gained through this process with a much wider group. Participants in the programme will also be encouraged to translate national decisions, discussions and debates into local processes on campuses, thus decentralising processes and allowing the views of ordinary students to interact with the union's concerns. It will also be a task of the year-long programme to facilitate a much longer-term gender strategy for SAUS, and to decide on the future of this group. It will be important to view this programme as not just involving training, but training with a view towards undertaking campaigns, shaping policy, and producing action amongst male and female students for gendered change.

Some time will have to be given towards selecting the women to become part of this programme. Successful women should be able to dedicate a full year (preferably more) to the work of SAUS, viewing their participation in this programme as just the beginning of their work in the union, and their leadership development. Their ability to commit long-term to the programme will be extremely important in ensuring the continuity that is needed to make gender transformation a reality for SAUS. Noting the relevance of this group to the overall orientation of the union, SAUS should spend some time discussing criteria for selection of this group.

An important reason for dedicating such time and effort towards the development of women leaders amongst students is to see more women in leadership positions. To this end, the women's development programme will also encourage the adoption of a quota by SAUS whereby 40% of all leadership positions have to be filled by women. SAUS will also encourage SRCs to adopt similar measures. The 40% mark should be viewed as a starting point that should

be increased over time. At present, 60% of the student body is female, yet this is not represented in terms of student leadership. SAUS believes that a targeted training and capacity-building process targeting women, linked to a broader process of education, awareness raising, research and policy formulation amongst men and women in the union, will assist both in making women available for leadership positions, and in addressing gender-related problems in the union.

Awareness Workshops & Training

Recognising that both men and women are socialised to assume their gendered roles in society, SAUS undertakes to run workshops for both male and female student leaders, and students at campus level to debate and discuss, and so challenge traditional gendered stereotypes and behaviour. The women's development group and the research and policy unit should take the lead in shaping this programme.

Curriculum Change

The SAUS research and policy unit should integrate gender into its focus on curriculum change.

Research & Policy Development

In order to properly understand the extent of gender problems in higher education, amongst students, and in SAUS, the research and policy unit should be tasked with developing a comprehensive approach to investigation of this issue. To facilitate proper assessment of interventions aimed at gendered transformation as well as our own attempts at changing SAUS' approach to gender issues, this unit should also explore monitoring and evaluation possibilities for SAUS in this regard.

A particular area of study that deserves attention by the research and policy unit is that of the reasons behind women's non-participation in student leadership. While much work has been done on prohibitive factors for working women joining trade unions, such as child care responsibilities, little research has been done on why so few female students get involved in student leadership, noting that students are usually free of many responsibilities in order to study and develop intellectually. How many students today are mothers (and fathers) and who takes responsibility for their children while they study and/or become involved in student leadership? And what are the policies in higher education that currently exist for student parents? These are just some of the questions that will need to be elaborated by the gender and research and policy units in designing a research project to investigate the obstacles that prevent female students from becoming leaders.

Under the leadership of a gender unit (see below) and the guidance of the research and policy unit and the NEC, a programme of debates and discussions

should be mapped out for all levels of the union to begin shaping policy around gender in a manner that speaks to the ordinary concerns of students. This programme could include different aspects of interaction and engagement at different levels of the union. For example, a series of 'speak out' sessions could be held at campus level to collect students' grievances related to gender (e.g. sexual harassment, rape, sexist lecturers), which could then feed into provincial and national discussions to try to find ways of addressing the problems identified in the 'speak-outs'. This programme should, however, be allowed to unfold through the work of the research and policy unit, the women's development group and the gender unit.

In a similar vein, discussions and debates about sexism, sexual harassment, and gender violence should be facilitated with the aim of developing definitions of and mechanisms for dealing with such cases, and elaborating a code of conduct and disciplinary measures for SAUS that are cognisant of gender.

Campaigns

Through all the above processes, it is envisaged that a number of campaigns focusing on specific gender issues will emerge, targeting higher education institutions, government, students, and looking inwards (at ourselves) as a structure. In addition, SAUS undertakes to develop campaigns around major national events, such as National Women's Day and the 16 Days Of Activism Against Violence Against Women, making them relevant for students. Campaigns should be viewed as ways of drawing students into discussions, debates and processes of gendered change, as well as working towards effecting gendered change in the higher education sector and society.

In addition to campaigns that overtly target gender issues, all other campaigns of SAUS should work to integrate gender concerns.

Structures & Institutional Relations For Gendered Change

In order to ensure that SAUS' commitments to women's empowerment and gender equality become meaningful in practice, institutional mechanisms need to be established to assign responsibility and ensure accountability. Any organisational structures need, however, to allow both for direction of processes and discussions from a national level and for processes and discussions to be shaped by affiliates and students at campus level.

National Gender Unit

A national gender unit will be established, consisting of the national governance and welfare officer and gender officers of affiliate SRCs. Where gender officers do not exist, SRCs will be encouraged to elect them or to task specific portfolios with responsibility for it. While women will be encouraged to take up these positions, men will not be prevented from filling them. On constitution of the gender unit, all members will attend a workshop during which basic gender

concepts will be explored, this policy document will be studied in detail, and concrete plans developed to give flesh to the programmes and processes proposed in this document. Members of the gender unit will work closely with the research and policy unit in this regard. The gender unit will take final responsibility for the overall gender work of SAUS, co-ordinating the concretisation of the plans outlined here. The gender unit will work closely with the national women's development group.

National Women's Development Group

The group of women students receiving targeted training, as outlined earlier, will play an important role in the life of SAUS. Not only will women be drawn from this pool to meet quota requirements, but the discussions and debates taking place in this group will be drawn on in policy formulation taking place around gender issues throughout the union. Representatives of this group should also participate in all major decision-making processes of the union, including NEC meetings. In this way, women will be exposed to all spaces and process in the union, and SAUS policies will benefit from the perspective of a group of women thinking and learning about gender at the time in relation to their lives as students, as leaders, and as members of SAUS.

Campus-Level Gender Units

SRCs will be encouraged (and assisted) to establish local gender units to oversee campaigns, discussions and policy formulation at campus level. Interested and committed students will be invited to discussions through which gender units will be formed. Gender units at campus level will be dynamic, with membership being open to anyone interested in joining at any point in time. Responsibilities will be rotated and shared, with the Gender Officers of SRCs taking responsibility for their co-ordination and proper functioning. These loose structures will also facilitate campus-level discussions about issues relating to gender policy formulation at a national level (within SAUS and in the higher education sector), thereby allowing national policy formulation processes to be shaped by campus-level discussions. In addition, these gender units will be responsible for campus-level training and development programmes on gender-related issues, and for women. Significantly, they will also be responsible for collecting data for the research and policy unit about gender related issues on campuses. Gender Officers of SRCs will be responsible for these units and provide regular reports on their activities to the national gender unit.