

Sibongile Masangwana

The document is translated from Zulu to English:

Facilitator: Thanks very much for your time. You can talk in Zulu or English. I am speaking with Mama Sibongile Masangwana we are in Johannesburg, the interview is done by Brown Maaba. Please give me your background, where were you born and raised and how you eventually got connected to union issues.

Respondent: My name is Sibongile Masangwana I married in Bongwe family, so Masangwane Bongwe. I was born and bred in Alexander township, I am from a family of girls only. Most of my family members are activists, so this means that this runs in the family. I was born in London, 90th Avenue, the people in the area were very involved, as a result we as kids growing we noticed what was going on. The struggle was visible because of things like the marches and things like that. I became more aware with the potato boycott, that we should not buy potatoes. At the time I was 11 or 12. We used to follow the activists in their marches, singing with them without really knowing the real reason. So the potatoes were boycotted. Chips from shops would be thrown in the streets and we would pick them up and eat those that are not damaged. As kids it was exciting. As I got older I realised that I did participated in the struggle at an earlier stage.

I grew older and clever, you go to school and learn other things. Alexander was a vibrant township, a lot of things used to happen in Alexander, there were gangs, Msomi Gang, Spoiler gang, etc. Most parents did not want their children to school in Alex for safety reasons. Most of the time I schooled outside Alex. My father worked at Primose

Mine in Germiston, the place was called Rosedip. He was promoted and had to let one of our relatives live there whilst we moved to Germiston City Centre, Rosedip was in City Centre, we were very fortunate at the time. So I went to school at New Comet in Boksburg which was a mine school. Rosedip closed down and we had to go back to Alex, we did not school in Alex, we schooled in Thembisa.

This is where I met a very strong struggle, organisations like SASO were there. I got involved by attending meetings and listening to what they were saying. Unfortunately I fell pregnant while still at school, fortunately the very same time I got married, I got married at a very early age, 18. I continued with the struggle, I married into this well to do family, they were anti-struggle, because they could afford all they wanted they did not see the need to join the struggle. I felt like an outcast because my in-laws always complained about me attending meetings. My father in law was a landlord, at times I would clash with him if he was wrong. I did not feel welcome because of my political involvement. We would fight for things like, he wants to increase the rent after two months, so I would tell him he is oppressing the tenants.

June 16 came, in Alex it was the 18th. We were very involved with the struggle, my husband assisted with his car by transporting those that are injured to the hospital or wherever. He had his own car. He assisted a lot with his car. Eventually he joined me in the struggle. In 1976 I was injured by the boers. In Alex we had the army, the army was given certain powers. I think I was injured on the 21st, I could not go to the clinic because the boers will find me. I had to leave and go stay with my uncle until I recovered. My leg was badly hurt. To be honest we were also crazy. When you walk into the premises and the army cars arrive, the

people would run away and unfortunately most of the people ran away and came straight to me. It was so visible. I had very good security. I locked my house, they broke down the door even though it took them long to break the door. When the door opened it hit my foot. I then took a break by visiting my uncle in KZN. That is how it started.

We then formed street committees, a lot of other things that we were doing, we were fighting the system that was implemented by the government. Landlords were forced to sell their land, forced removals. After the forced removals, the system turned around and, behind everybody's back of the activist that they are re-selling the land back to them. They were so excited and did not understand what was going on. The tenants felt that we are not equal, the landlord .., we had to have street committees to control what is causing confusion. How can (interruption) – so we formed strong street committees, I was amongst the organisers. We tried to fix the whole set up, again I had another clash with my father in law. The system had taken the title deed and gave you money, call you again and say the place still belongs to you. It was strange that the community did not realise that this will cause unnecessary conflict so that we do not reach our goal. People did not realise this they were just excited that they got their money back. It was peri-urban then, people started paying for services, the tenants had to pay rent and services, there was so much conflict. Things got out of control, other people started spying for the regime, some people left the country illegally and went into exile. I didn't want to leave the country, probably one of the reasons was because I already had a family to look out too, my mother was also not well. Unfortunately my mother died in 1980, I had to look after my siblings. The last born was 8 years old. My in-laws were so supportive, the youngest was able to come and live with us.

In 1981 I started working. My father in law worked for a company called Wigney, nowadays it is called Wispeco. He got me a job there, the director was looking for a young lady to make tea. I started working there. I worked there for 2 years until he retired. I had to leave because the set up was not right. Black people were calling whites baas and girl, the people employed had been there for quite some time. There was no way one could change their mindsets, they had been there for more than ten years, they were hard nuts to crack.

I left the company, a priest informed me that their company is transforming and growing, a transport company in Midrand, that was in 1983, the director also wanted someone to make tea for him. He didn't like tea boys he wanted a feminine touch so that there's a difference. I worked with the owner, the owner was Mr Lambega and the name of the company was called Lambega's group of companies, it was all over South Africa, in all the provinces, he was doing well. So when you work with him, he had a big boardroom, times two the size of this room. At night the Germans would arrive from 6 in the evening. My duties were to ensure that the board room is clean at all time, the fridge should have enough drinks and alcohol. I ended up specialising in German food, he asked his helper to come and taught me how to maintain the board room and the food. I now became an all rounder in the company, I would sometimes relieve the receptionist. The receptionist, Susan had had an accident. I also assisted in her absence. They also taught me how to check the oil and water in the car. I learnt everything including understanding what deep stick is so that I do not get stuck. The director taught all his employees to be responsible. If you are stuck somewhere you must give all the details. He was very strict and made sure that we

learn (phone rang). So I learnt a lot. It was clear that there is segregation within the company. I asked questions "what is going on" people wouldn't tell me anything.

The guy I travelled with I kept on asking him can you see that something is wrong, when we sit in meetings we are anti what is going on. The owner has companies all over the country, he is making a lot of money, you guys are earning a lot of money, I had access to their salaries. I talked to them gradually to join unions until they made up their minds to join the union. I didn't have enough knowledge about unions. I did some research and learnt that there's a union called Transport and General Workers Union. (interruption), I did some research and found Transport and General Workers Union, I got the information for them, those that are interested I helped them to register, I got Susan Shabangu, an organiser, we arranged that they should also meet with Musa Bhengu. That is how it started. People became interested, the secret was out and the German (the owner) lost his mind. When he lost his mind everybody was worried, I told them not to worry, he had told me that he belonged to a union in his country. The owner understood that there will be changes. They carried on and became strong.

The union was recognised in 1984, I was elected as a shop steward in a company with a population of 90%. The employers felt that I am too close with the owner and if you've already joined you are a member there's no turning back. There was no way I was going to please the employer at the expense of the workers. I wanted to do everything right, I was going ahead with the struggle. Then T and G affiliated to COSATU. There was a call to form a very big union, we accepted the call, in 1985 COSATU was formed in Durban. I was unable to attend because at the time I had a

baby, Mancoba who was born in September. So the federation became very strong. COSATU was a good union. I remember at the time, we were already aware that PAC/ANC were banned, so the vehicle to assist South Africa to be democratic was through COSATU. I was three in one, a shop steward at work, at home an activist, I was also the chairperson in our area which was called Mandela area. It was the first time in Alex for a woman to be appointed as the chair. The branch had affiliates of IFP, ANC, PAC .., under the banner of SANCO. I do not know how I managed, there was never any conflict, we fought with the IFP, but when it came to community issues we were one. We solved a lot of problems. There was also another committee called the Wing of Women, we participated in it, then it was called Fetro. I alone was involved in all the three committees. My parents died early and my sisters would come and stay with me, I also had a husband who was very supportive. So I didn't have problems with house chores, everything was done because everyone supported me. My husband would cook, he has also taught our children the importance of knowing how to cook. I was supported that is why I was able to belong to so many committees.

Under COSATU we were very busy, there were many campaigns. We were all over (I have an old book and some other things I can give to you). We also had strong affiliates, the women had Women's Forum this is the one they said it is not gender sensitive. It was formed in 1987/88. T and G Women's Section was led by me. I was vibrant in community, women issues and politics. The Transport and General workers union, women had a problem of sexual harassment, people would pass remarks " they think they are smart and they are only exploring". Some of the officials would be dating 5 women at the same time, the structure did not get any stronger because when a woman is dumped she no longer

comes. So T and G was in the forefront of forming a resolution on sexual harassment. The resolution was sent to COSATU congress. I can't remember where. The resolution was tabled but it was not approved. In FAWU women were vibrant, they were anti-the resolution. We knew that this is destroying structures, the women will kept at the lower levels. NUMSA, Chemical and T and G, the other unions were not sure as yet.

At the next congress, we had mobilised everyone, the resolution was approved because people now understood. An organisation called Shap??, which is a baby of COSATU. Today they have forgotten, Shap has no funds and it is stranded. People have forgotten because when they arrive in a new place they do not go back and check the history so that they can improve on it. If you can go to COSATU archives, most of the information is lost, it is all over. That is how Shap started. Were you able to see the speaker of Ekurhuleni, he was also a shop steward for SACAWU, Pat. He has a very sad story to tell. He was harassed by the bosses for ringing the bell. They traumatised him. Speak to Pat, he is also in this book (she had given you a book). So that is where we come from, Shap was our baby. We fought by campaigning for maternity leave, paternity leave, compassionate leave etc. We ensured that there are agreements in place, we signed the agreements with the companies. People didn't even have provident fund.

I was now in Midrand, my job was to mobilise each and every shop steward, each one, teach one, we mobilised. After work we did not go home, we would go and mobilise and organise the workers. If they are not organised we would organise them. For instance security guards and cleaners, after work we would be all over Braamfontein so that we can organise the security guards and cleaners. That is where Sam Shilowa

(today he is called Mbhazima), we used to mobilise them, we got them to join the trade unions. He hasn't been long in the union, they were organised by us, me and Mosa Bhengu. The advantage was that Musa had a work so we used the car, we would mobilise the security officers. The ones that worked during the day they were afraid to join, the ones that work at night we were able to organise them to join the union. Transport and General Workers Union, we had goods, security and cleaning. NEHAWU is from Tand G, even SAMU, the municipal union comes from T and G. The organisations have grown now. So we worked and mobilised everyone. The end result for us was we wanted freedom, we wanted our country to be democratic.

In 1988 we were chosen, the five of us, we went to London, we were at the Nelson Mandela March in London. Elizabeth Thabede was also there. She was the former deputy minister of DTI, you should be able to trace him

Facilitator: I spoke to her yesterday

Respondent: she must give you more information and more people because under COSATU for you to participate in Women's Gender, we were 5 per union, she was amongst the five. When we went march for the Free Mandela March in London it was Elizabeth Thabede, myself and Dorothy Mogale, she is now late, there was also one lady from SADTU, there was a Domestic Worker's Union, Laura, I forgot her name, and then from NUM there was Cynthia from NUM, NUM at the time used to have women who participated, NUM, T and G, and another woman Ntomboxolo from Cape Town, so we marched at the Free Nelson Mandela march. We managed to interact with exiled people, I also met Oliver Tambo, we were privileged to be part of the march. We saw most

people there, others were happy for us because we were from South Africa, others wanted to know what is going on in the country. We told them that we attended under the trade union banner. Some of them did not think that they will be coming back. We believed that they will come back.

In 1990 there was a Women's Conference in Netherlands, that is why the ball and that is why I am supporting Netherlands. The conference was called Malibongwe Women's Conference, it was 1988 in Amsterdam. Six months later they were back. We started meeting people like Geraldine and the others. Most people are asking me why am I not an MP, we couldn't all go to parliament. I was a shop steward and worked in the trucking industry, the company had cases every time. The drivers would take chances in order to make money – some would be carrying dagga, etc., but they were trying to make money. In 1991/1992 we were excited, we knew that we are getting our country back, CODESA had started. Shop stewards were busy with cases, they are taken to arbitration, there was no CCMA at the time, the cases would go to the labour court and arbitration. I had a serious retrenchment case. As a result when re-list was being prepared I was not interested. I believed that the people appointed me as their shop steward and I must deliver. So what came first for me as a shop steward was one's pride, that one did not lose the case. Remember that we are not educated, but because of the teaching of COSATU, we were knowledgeable. We were able to handle a case against the lawyers of the employers, we were taught how to handle cases. Tomson, Kidle and Hayson, that was our university, we learnt from them, they taught us the tricks of winning cases. I have never lost a case whether it went to the labour court or not. Arbitration I knew that I will win the case. If a person was wrong, we would find some

technicalities and they would lose the case. For instance if the employer had an agreement with the union in the company, even if you found the employee right handed, you involve the police without consulting with the union. We will wait for the case to be finalised and then find a technicality with that. In most cases they would forget the importance of informing the union.

We liberated the country, we tried to change the mindset of the people, we encouraged people to take pride in what they do, who are you? I was never arrested even though I have worked so hard. I moved from one province to the other. Shop stewards were responsible for many things, we got to know each other, we got our freedom, unfortunately we have forgotten about other comrades, others went up and others remained on the ground. What hurts me is that we should have had trusts. The comrades after liberation became too excited, the signed agreements were not taken forward. At the moment Telkom employers wanted 8% what can one do with 8%, we used to get 12 or 10%, what happened to the agreements that were signed. People were there for themselves. Some comrades live in the streets and in informal settlements. We won our country back but we did not have foresight, other comrades flat on the ground, they needed to be taken into consideration. Nothing like that happened. We remained behind, I believe we are in exile, nobody thought about the future, what happens if I do not work anymore. The people from exile have trust fund, they have special pension, nothing for us because we did not get out of the country, we are told that we were working. Can you really say a person who is earning so little ..., remember I told you I was a shop steward, belonged to women structures and the civic. All my money was spent on running around. Trade unions did not have funds. The workers ensured that the officials have money to travel.

There was no special fund, our money was spent for the struggle. We assisted each other, remember at the time, people were injured, other comrades died, we risked our lives. I had to leave home after I was injured so that I can heal my leg for six months. I was able to go to the hospital in Ladysmith because my grandfather worked there. They would have found me if I had gone here. People keep saying you don't qualify, you wonder why.

Others were getting scholarships, they were improving their lives and education, they qualify, we didn't get scholarships, nobody assisted us to improve our lives and education, what is worse we did not qualify for the special pension. When we were liberated we did not forecast what would happen to all the comrades, we also fought for the country, the grants should be spread across the board. We are free but I am still busy as I was before, I am still with women issues, another one is the one on women empowerment through co-operatives. The MEC Xedani Mahlangu is trying to empower women especially in hospitals so that when the contracts are due for renewal, the project will be given to the women, cleaning, linen etc., because they are presently dominated by white people. We have a breakthrough because we selected 12 co-operatives which complied and met the standards. Right now we are working on them getting financial support. We have two orders already, one hospital ordered for R3 million. Ordinary women formed a co-operatives, financially they are not okay. We are trying to get financial support so that they can themselves up. The MEC has tried her best, if all goes well, all the hospitals will be supplied by the 12 co-operatives, this is a job creation project. The other organisation we had an opportunity with is the South African Women in Dialogue, under the leadership of the former first lady, Zanele Mbeki. I learnt a lot from it. I learned about computers,

they paid for me, I also learnt about protocol, all those things. That is how I learnt the importance of protocol. The biggest job I did was working with Older Persons and Veterans. I worked with veterans who were neglected. I did it wholeheartedly because I feel when we liberated the country others were left out.

There's a lady who died this year, mama Dlamini, her lawyer was Nelson Mandela, she went all over. We were surprised that she was left out. Mama Dlamini wanted to visit Robben Island, she also wanted to go to No 4 which is now termed Constitutional Hill, she wishes to fly, she also wishes to visit Freedom Park. We were able to fulfil their wishes. When she came back from Robben Island, she was very appreciative. In the end when we talked she would say to me "I am no longer angry, there are people who appreciate me". She died after I did her story. I am trying to get funding so that I can collect stories of the older persons. Unfortunately my husband died in December and I took a break, I am now with the co-operatives, I want my mind to divert a little. After that I will try and get funding to produce a booklet or books. We just need a sponsor and a producer. The funds will be put into a trust account so that their children can live on it. Next year June I will go back and finish the book. This will make me happy.

Facilitator: Just to go back a little mama, you said you come from a politically family. Was your father or mother who was into politics?

Respondent: My father was a miner, we were young when he was promoted, at home people would arrive. On my mother's side, my grandfather, Mkhulu Kunene from London, cnr London and 22 in Alexander, he is gone now, he did not have an id until he died. He used

to belong to an organisation that we called Didamshito, he belonged to that organisation. As a result when my uncle passed on, when they were giving his clothes away, the jacket that he marched with came out, I asked for the jacket. I took it with and showed my boy that this is what the ANC used to wear in the olden days. My aunt's children are also shop steward. My aunt will tell you that she fought when the Indians were fighting blacks in KZN. I am from that kind of family, except of course the family I married into. They were just standing on the fence, to date. My family to date, all my sisters are involved, one was once the chairperson of Women's League. In 1986 our house was bombed, when people were moved around, others went to Thembisa and Soweto. My sister when she got there she joined the structures. If things do not happen in Alex I would go home and meet with the others and we would discuss. My home was called the home of comrades. I don't know why the house was bombed, we still don't know why they were doing this.

Facilitator: You also said there was a division between the Alex community, stands were bought from them and then given back. What happened to that kind of lifestyle and the problem between people who have money and those that didn't have money?

Respondent: I think white people or the government realised that they have lost. They bought the stands and sold them back to the owners. Former landlords went back to buy the stands through local government. The stands were much smaller now. They were excited that they are buying their stands back. They now had to pay for services, peri-urban, the landlord will now request rent and the tenants would refuse because they cannot pay twice. They tenants felt that how does the landlord purches land that once belonged to him, how an he buy land when the

country is in the process of being liberated. To date it is still a problem. Most of the landlords are now dead and the stands are left with their children. They did not think they were just greedy. The white government bought the land from them, they were then told to buy the stands back. When the black government took over, they called all the people and compensated the people with R50 000. they were all given R50 000, if you had two you would get R100 000. A lot of people thought that the money was too much because they had to share with other family members, they then wanted to collect rent from the tenants (phone rang). This was created by greed, they should have resisted. Our government has paid them, what more do they want. This is not happening in Alex only, in most townships, Pimville, they also received money, Alex is a big problem. The ANC government needs to close the matter and finalise it. There is no order in Alex.

Facilitator: the relationship between you and your boss, the German boss, how was it when you became the shop steward.

Respondent: the relationship became tense, but somewhere he showed some remorse, he wanted peace between us. He moved me around, at times I would work at Marikana in Rustenburg, some days I am at SABC, I knew what I wanted and was happy that I will learn more. He had a transport and construction company, he thought that when he threw me to the construction wing he was frustrating me, he was actually empowering me. When SABC was built he was the main contractor. I had no knowledge of the industry but I learnt all the basics, he wanted me to fail and I didn't. A young man assisted me, he showed me all the basics in the industry. He actually skilled me. I worked there and he returned me to his office, if we fight again he will move me again. Our

disagreements were based on the union cases. Most of the cases the company was supposed to win them but we won.

In 1995 a lot of people were unemployed, I also resigned and joined Gauteng Self Employed Women's association which transformed and was called Gauteng Self Employed Women's union. I worked there and mobilised women who lost their jobs, those that were retrenched so that they can be self employed. At the time the premier for Gauteng, Dr Mathole Motshega, he supported the idea. The ANC removed Motshega and brought in a new premier who threw the project out. We then started struggling – through the union we worked and mobilised people, we showed them that we cannot depend on being hired, you can hire yourself, there are co-operatives which made it easy to mobilise. I had 200 co-operatives. I went back and got those that were taught in Mathole's time, they had grown and had their own machines. It was easy to work with them with the co-operatives. We assisted those that did not belong to any co-operatives.

Facilitator: Being a woman leader in a man's land,,

Respondent: being a shop steward at Lambega's Transport, the union was male dominated .., at the time I used to love talking, I think at the time I had told myself that they will not beat me, I felt that I have the power because I attended meetings, I listen and look and information is power. I am walking with a man to the hearing and I'm going to represent him, he is shaking and you win the case. He goes back to the men and tell them that Sibongile won the case. Those kinds of things helped because I gained a lot of respect from the men. The men in the transport industry are very arrogant, they will call you "woman" even if

they know your name. I worked very hard as a shop steward. It was not easy because the leadership of Susan Shabangu, she is now the Minister of Minerals, her husband Musa Bhengu died. Mosa was so serious, he would come to my place and ask me to attend courses, I attended all the courses because I know that I am in a male dominated industry, I had to have skills in order to protect myself. Eventually they realised that I am their saviour. During the festive season they would come to my place bringing me gifts. The funny thing is, they will never tell you that they appreciate you, the gifts will speak on their behalf.

Facilitator: is there anything you wish to add?

Respondent: I think we talked about everything. Did you go and see Google, look for Malehoko, he had an interview, his was longer, about two days. Are you doing research?

Facilitator: yes

Respondent: It will be nice if the research can be kept and given to other people to learn from the experiences. We used to fight at comrades, side by side, today one doesn't know what has happened to their families, people like Dorothy, Stokes, Eunice Khumalo who is based at COSATU office. Today they are called administrators, at the time administrators within union offices were organisers of women forums. We worked very hard. Nowadays we don't know whether their graves have tombstones, you don't know where their children are. I would love if we can go back and take stock of what happened to the comrades, where are their children, what are they doing and where are they. If we are still alive to form trust fund and assist the families, we fought side by side. Our stories, I

would like to see our stories being told on TV, or other forms of media etc. The information should not be left as is people are dying. The comrades, the Freedom Park .., you will not find Dorothy Mogale's name there but she was very strong. She was the first gender co-ordinator employed by COSATU. Her name is no where nor are other names. We would like our roles to be recognised. The labour movement assisted the ANC, civic organisations were also there, they need to recognise that people fought side by side. Our stories must be told – produce a book or a docu..., a foreigner should not come and tell us about our country.

Facilitator: thank you very much mama for your time.

End

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