

## **The traders' champion**

By Greg Ardé

Precise, serious, ex-wife, mother, Roman Catholic-turned communist. Many more things define Pat Horn, but writing about the 53-year-old Durban-based international co-ordinator of StreetNet requires economy of words.

Horn has done a lot in her life. Now she adds lustre to her accomplishments by lobbying for the rights of 200 000 informal workers in 18 countries. It is an interesting job. It has recently seen her booted out of Zimbabwe, attend a conference in Uruguay and go to court to help street barbers in their fight against the Durban City Council.

### Affinity

Horn lives in Glenwood, Durban. Her home is a far cry from the lodgings she once shared with a family in Empangeni's Esikhawini township in 1981, where she went to work as a union organiser, or the home of freedom fighter Harold Strachan in Overport, or the construction camps that her father moved his family around when she was a child.

"My dad was an engineer. He built dams and canals and we (his wife and five children) trekked around South Africa with him . . . We made a lot of friends with the children of the artisans and labourers."

Horn developed an affinity for the poor, although her matter-of-fact approach hides any sentimentality.

Her average day involves negotiating with authorities and informal traders around the world.

Horn finished school at Pretoria Girls' High School. She has a Bachelor of Arts degree and has published a staggering array of articles, most of them related to the emancipation of women.

Here is a taste of the titles: "Marxism and feminism: Uneasy bedfellows?" printed in *The African Communist*; "Gender and affirmative action" written for an academic journal; "The informal sector: building a working-class alliance" appeared in a labour bulletin; and "Challenging globalisation: organising workers in the informal sector" was written for a Cosatu gender workshop.

Horn's interest in street traders developed out of her union work in the 1970s and 1980s. She was with a number of unions, perhaps most notably the Paper Wood and Allied and Chemical Workers' Industrial unions after her banning and restriction order was lifted.

Between 1976 and 1981, the apartheid government barred her from working with trade unions or educational institutions. She spent her time reading up on communism, in between waitressing and working as a receptionist.

When her banning order was lifted, she was back in the unions for a decade.

She took a sabbatical in 1990, when she was Adjunct Fellow at the Simone de Beauvoir Institute, Concordia University, Montreal, studying "the comparative status of women in countries undergoing social change". The idea was to develop ideas on how to organise the emancipation of women in post-apartheid South Africa.

She used Canadian, Mozambican and Nicaraguan experience to consider what she hadn't been able to do in the unions: marginalised women.

She read up on Sewa, the Indian-based Self-Employed Women's Association, set up in 1972 to cater for women in the informal sector who do not have regular income or benefits.

Horn's investigation coincided with a decision to spend more time with her own children. By 1994, she had a black belt in karate and had launched the Self-Employed Women's Union, styled on Sewa. It was a risky move in that she had no mandate, but did have funding.

"My guiding philosophy was to do what we did in the unions in the 1970s . . . we trudged through factories and shebeens and didn't promise any improvements because there was no legal framework within which to offer them. We had nothing to offer except a promise to fight. But, we worked on, slowly and surely."

This tenacity spurred Horn to borrow a name tag and slip into an International Labour Organisation conference in Geneva in 1993, where, having received Cosatu's blessing from Sam Shilowa to establish her union, she negotiated donor funding.

Liquidate

Back in Durban, she dealt with beachfront vendors, muti sellers and officials. The union grew to 3 000 members with 25 staff in five branches across South Africa.

In 2001, Horn left the union and started StreetNet, the international alliance of street vendors, which launched formally in Durban in 2002. Sewu was forced to liquidate in 2004 after a labour dispute with two employees.

Meanwhile, StreetNet has continued to increase its affiliated unions, co-operatives or associations in Africa, Asia and Latin America.

Horn promotes an exchange of information and ideas on issues facing vendors around the world.

Her advocacy is meant to improve the lives of millions of street vendors. It is an effort underpinned by statistics generated by a body with the clumsy acronym Wiego (Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising).

Wiego is made up of scholars and non-governmental organisations like StreetNet around the world. Its members study markets, value chains, urban policies, and social protection programmes.

Horn says making a difference can be a complicated business for StreetNet.

"The dynamics of street vendor organisations are fluid, they're not clean and stable. There are mafia types you sometimes have to work through. The sector has class divisions and lots of patronage."

Describing what she does is more difficult. "When I tell people what I do, this is generally what they say: 'Oh, you help the street kids. Uh, street vendors, do they all sell tomatoes?' "

Horn says a progressive approach to street vendors will contribute to poverty alleviation by helping to create decent work in the informal economy.

"We don't want people to stay vendors. But they can't move on in the economy if they are constantly evicted. They support extended families and have to keep on earning to pay the bills and move on to the formal economy."

StreetNet's work has pitched it into direct opposition to the eThekweni Council, which Horn says was once a shining example of best practice towards vendors.

"That was between 2001 and 2003 . . . but at the moment, Durban has no register of licensed vendors and the police action against them is arbitrary."

Horn says a provincial Green Paper on the informal economy and the outcome of a court challenge against the eThekweni Council will help shape the future for Durban's 25 000 street traders.

The traders serve a population of more than three million.

Until things become more formal, Horn says she will continue to advocate on their behalf, and draw on the experience of Wiego members and her affiliates in cities like Calcutta (120 000 street traders; 10 million people) and Sao Paulo (300 000; 25 million).

"I believe we can create better alternatives through organisation. The small victories we win along the way keep fuelling my belief that collectively we can move mountains. I believe in workers and I believe in women. This has led me to organise workers in the informal economy - and we seem to be making good progress."

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