

# Conference on Equality: Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, and Labor Rights: Transforming the Terrain

“Gender and the Unfinished Business of the Labor  
Movement

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Sisters and Brothers

Welcome

- Leaders of the great trade union movement of Brazil
- Representatives of the Global Unions and the International Trade Union Confederation
- Representatives of the International Labor Organization
- Trade unions and worker organizations, friends, academics and allies from around the world
- Solidarity Center staff from around the world

Look around this room. Look at the nearly 100 people from more than 20 countries, trade unionists and worker rights advocates and activists all here to focus on working women and gender equality. This room is a powerful testament to what the men and women of the global labor movement have to say about gender justice. When I talk about a labor movement, I mean the trade union movement of which I consider myself a proud part; and I mean our broader movement too, of intellectuals and academics, allies in NGOs and across civil society who understand that more just and democratic societies are built on inclusion and opportunity. That is the dream and the promise of the labor movement.

And it is the right time for us to come together here in Sao Paulo for this conference: *Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality and Labor Rights: Transforming the Terrain.*

Nearly 20 ago the World Conference on Women in Beijing promised a Plan of Action aimed at advancing gender equality and women's rights as key to economic development, peace and democracy. It has become common knowledge

since then, that unleashing women's economic potential can move entire economies and that opening space for women in political systems is fundamental to cementing true and stable democracy. Much of the Beijing agenda centered on women's individual liberties, educational attainment and access to health care and many other very critical measures of women's empowerment. It also advanced the notion that the right to decent work with dignity is also a fundamental women's right.

Against the backdrop of the Beijing conference and its goals, is a real story, mostly going untold, and that is the story of women workers in the global economy. It is the story of enormous injustice and incredible, awe inspiring hope that so many of you bring with you to this conference.

Women are working more than ever before and in many places, in the labor market at the same rate as men. Women are 40% of the global labor force today. But the quality of our jobs has not kept pace with our entrance to the labor market, certainly not as envisioned by Beijing. Women contribute 66 per cent of the world's work, but earn 10 per cent of the income and own 1 per cent of property.

*These statistics show starkly how women's labor exploitation robs them, their families and communities of billions of dollars in income, and fuels the race to the bottom. Women are on the frontlines of the worst aspects of the global economy. Directly confronting the gendered nature of economic exploitation is part of the unfinished business of Beijing conference, but more importantly, of the global labor movement.*

And why not? Labor movements are fundamentally about shifting power away from elites. The labor movement uses its muscle all the time to make systems more just for average people. Why not for women?

### **The United States**

When we are talking about the struggle for gender justice the next few days, we will be talking about universal wins and universal struggles. I am from the United States where women are 45% of union members and rising, and women, especially women of color from historically marginalized communities, are more likely to want to join a union in the United States than any other group of workers. Women and people of color are the future of our labor movement in the United States

and today for the first time, women hold two of the three highest elected positions in the American labor movement, Executive Vice President Arlene Holt Baker and Secretary-Treasurer Liz Shuler of the AFL-CIO.

Yet at the same time, women continue to represent only 20% of the elected leadership of the Executive Council of the AFL-CIO. I suspect we will hear a lot about this dynamic too, the next few days.

Women are the sole or primary breadwinners in 40% of American families. But in the United States, women still only make 77 cents on the dollar to men, a gap that costs women half a million dollars in lost earnings over her lifetime. This holds true globally. A recent study by the ITUC found that women in 43 countries earn 18% less on average than their male counterparts.

So, this too is part of the unfinished business of the labor movement in my country, and those of us from the United States here are anxious to learn your strategies and techniques for promoting equality in your labor movements, during this conference.

## **Race to the Bottom: agriculture and manufacturing for export**

What I think will come out in the next two days of this conference, is that labor movements across the globe cannot afford to NOT to get on the gender equality train. The strategic exploitation of women workers for the economic gain of business, is one of the key global dynamics driving down wages and working conditions and keeping working people from their rights, across the globe.

To take an example from agriculture and food, one of the themes of this conference, to illustrate this point:

Globally women provide 43% of agricultural labor but in the developing world, that share can be as high as 60-80%. Women produce the food that feeds the world. In the United States, we import fruits and vegetables into our restaurants, from around the world. In the American restaurant, food is served to customers by female servers. In the United States female restaurant servers are 3 times more likely to be paid below the poverty

line and twice as likely to need government food aid to survive than other workers.

At the same time across Latin America, the majority of agricultural workers are employed in insecure, informal jobs— and they are also women. The women who pick and process the vegetables and fruits for export are more likely than men in the sector to be underpaid, and also to be exposed to harmful pesticides because of the specific roles they play on farms. And these categories of women workers—in agriculture in Latin America, and in the restaurant industry in the United States—are among the least likely to be unionized or even qualify under labor laws for unionization, and among the most likely to be working poor. The restaurant industry is seeing record profits -- because women workers not getting a fair shake, in the United States or in Latin America.

These dynamics tell the real story of economic globalization, and how women's exploited labor shapes and defines the terrain. Women's cheap labor makes millions, billions for economic elites and governments that collude with them to create labor market regulations and weak labor laws that mean workers cannot easily organize and bargain

for increased wage share and better laws. It starts with one multi-billionaire and ends in more than 1000 predominantly female workers making survival wages tragically killed in a series of building collapses and factory fires in Bangladesh. If we want to stem the unrelenting race to the bottom we must fight for the workers at the bottom of the supply chain, starting with the women.

### **What can the labor movement do?**

Later this afternoon we will hear about how women agricultural and manufacturing workers are organizing politically and through their unions to change this dynamic and in so doing, are improving working conditions for many thousands and contributing to development outcomes for their communities and countries.

There are many ways unions help facilitate women's equal access to resources and improve their social and political status, which we will discuss in more detail the next two days. When workers have a voice on the job through a union, they have a way to fight for better livelihoods, and rights:

- Unions fight nationally for minimum or living wage legislation that, when enforced, has a disproportionate impact on women's salaries
- unions provide a voice at work that can be an actual institutional mechanism for women to fight sexual harassment
- unions help people who are in informal employment achieve formality or have social protections extended to them—and women benefit disproportionately here as well because they are overrepresented in informal work, especially in the global south

This is the tip of the iceberg of what unions can do. But the degree to which labor unions take on women priorities, consciously? This is the challenge for us and I think this gets back to the other theme of this conference, the need for transformational leadership.

### **The Solidarity Center**

We are recommitting the Solidarity Center, in part through this conference, to play a role in what we hope will be a renewed focus of the global labor

movement for equality—the unfinished business of the labor movement. We are engaged in a renewed institutional effort to bring women workers voices and power to the fore in the fight for labor rights, gender equality and economic justice in all 60 countries where we work. It is absolutely central to our mission to do this, for all the reasons I described so far. This conference helps us mobilize and strategize about how to use our own resources to really help stand up for equality.

**We need a social movement agenda and this is part of the unfinished business of the labor movement as well**

For all that is inequitable in the global economy -- these elites lower expectations for what is possible. *And we are not a movement of low expectations.* Our movement, the labor movement, has fueled some of the most inspiring social change movements in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. We are right here in Brazil where the Workers Party and the labor movement helped transform this country out of military rule into democracy and on the path to social justice. We have leadership from COSATU of South Africa here, and those of us in

the labor movement gain daily inspiration thinking about the brave and principled fight South African unions waged for years against Apartheid and continue to lead for a just, and democratic South Africa today. Across the Arab World trade unions are leading the fight for social justice. And right now, all eyes are focused on Bangladesh, where predominantly female apparel sector workers make some of the lowest wages in the world and work in some of the most dangerous conditions -- but they are shining a light on exploitation and speaking up for rights at work despite enormous odds--and we will hear from them at this conference.

*On the most basic but profound level, our work contributes to social movement building for progressive economic and political policies that support workers in countries around the world. The gender equality agenda is central to this fight.*

Unions do not exist for the sake of it. Organizing builds institutions that give workers collective voice and potential power, but that is not the end of what we are about. We are about building more just societies, we are about transforming political and economic systems of exclusion and inequality

that exempt and marginalize and minimize—into political and economic systems that actually work for real people.

And so I will say to you today, that that most radical pro woman agenda is right here in this room. The most radical feminist agenda is right here, in who you are and who you and your organizations represent. And this room is also filled, with men. So a shout out to my brothers here who recognize that pay inequity and gender based violence at work hurt us all. Who have flown in from all over to share what they know about exploitation and how to fight it. I raise a (water) glass to my radical brothers whose sisters daughters friends and heroes are not getting their fair share in the global economy and because they are trade unionists and labor activists, they are here to talk about that and say – PRESENTE! I am here.

## **Brazil**

We need the labor movement, to be the transformational force for justice it can be.

And that is why it is exciting to be here in Brazil for this conference. We are here intentionally in order to build off their experience.

Over the last ten years, the labor movement of Brazil has taken on gender equality and as a result, the Workers' Party led government has made important strides not only in decreasing income inequalities in Brazil, but also in correcting historical gender imbalances. For example, in 2006 President Lula signed a law which strengthens protections against domestic violence. Also, just this year, Brazil expanded protections for domestic workers, giving the over 7 million women working in the sector the right for the first time to overtime, unemployment insurance, and a 44 hour work week. This is on top of other social policies that have helped thousands of families (many female headed households) leave poverty through substantially increasing the real minimum wage and expanding cash-transfer programs. This year, Brazilians have again taken to the street for more equality, and more from their government. Unions have played an integral role in advocating for all of these new policies in Brazil, and have also provided their own examples of promoting gender equality. In

particular, in 2012 the CUT revised its bylaws to make gender parity obligatory in all leadership forums within the trade union central's structure. In addition, the Forca Sindical has mandated a 30% quota for women in all of their leadership bodies.

So we celebrate the achievements of the Brazilian labor movement today. When the Brazilian labor movement or any of our labor movements stand up for working women, we can transform our societies and change the world.

Thanks and I'm looking forward to a great conference