



Women's Empowerment, Gender Equality, and Labor Rights

São Paulo
Brazil
July 2013

Transforming the Terrain



Conference Summary

In July 2013, the Solidarity Center (an AFL-CIO-aligned worker rights organization supporting the struggle for women's and men's economic and political empowerment in more than 60 countries) hosted a meeting of nearly 100 worker/activists, union leaders, and academics to share experiences and ideas for advancing women's labor rights and gender equality. The conference focused on three themes: women's labor rights in **agriculture** and **light manufacturing**—two sectors that between them employ hundreds of millions of women around the world and which are central to the economic development of many countries—and **transformational leadership in unions**. **Transformational leadership** is a way of leading based on inclusion, power sharing, participation, and collective analysis that enables and relies upon workers' voices to be front and center and readily embodies gender equality as a core principle.

Participants' inspiring and insightful presentations and discussions reflected the scope, power and depth of women's leadership in the international labor movement. Below are highlights of their work.

Women are building power through education, organizing, alliances and political action.

- Rosa Aguilar, secretary of Women's Affairs at the Campesol agribusiness union in Peru, described how her union reaches out to women to explain its work on issues most relevant to their lives, such as health care. Over time, this approach has achieved higher levels of women's union activity and leadership.
- In Morocco, women working in agriculture are taking part in unique trainings tailored for a workforce with low literacy, said Touriya Lahrech, Executive Council member of the *Confederation Democratique du Travail* (CDT). The CDT is also bringing women's priorities to the bargaining table by conducting extensive dialogues with rural women workers and including their demands and concerns in a draft contract—the first of its kind in Morocco. The union is now negotiating the contract on behalf of hundreds of employees.
- As a critical first step to empowering and organizing women, the Honduras Federation of Agricultural Unions and the Latin American Banana and Agro-industrial Unions (COLSIBA) developed and implemented a sectoral needs assessment to study working conditions, women's role in the union and how women interact in society. That diagnostic led to the platform of demands the union now uses across the region, and formed the template for the clauses the union includes in collective bargaining agreements with local and multinational enterprises. Trainings, especially those to train the trainers, were key to getting women to recognize their rights and to participate directly in negotiating for them.
- Claudia Santos Reguelin from the Brazilian Metalworkers Union of the City of Osasco shared how the union's Women's Collective provides a space for women to participate and grow as leaders and members. The

collective runs seminars for workers and ensures issues central to women—who comprise up to 80 percent of factory workers—are on the bargaining table.

- Sally Choi, project coordinator for the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) on China and International Affairs, described the founding of the women’s labor movement in Hong Kong, which resulted in part from women working together in study circles (initiated by feminist NGOs) to better understand capitalism, and from their emerging understanding of how patriarchy was used to exploit women for capitalist gain. Unable to convince unions to focus on their issues, however, women went on to form their own organizations to support women worker rights. Now, after years of working together on labor rights issues and making common cause with traditional unions, the HKCTU itself actively campaigns for women worker rights, most recently by pushing the government to improve the nation's workplace sexual harassment laws to cover women in service and retail jobs.
- Women comprise the majority of light manufacturing workers in Honduras, where Evangelina Argüeta Chincilla is coordinator for the Apparel Sector Organizing at the General Workers Confederation. Argüeta described how unions created international support for their struggle after workers were prevented from joining unions in Honduras. Women garment workers achieved victories, such as reopening a closed factory, through “alliances with the United States and with student groups,” she said. “Students are the main consumers of our products.”
- An executive committee member of the *Central Única dos Trabalhadores* (CUT), Rosana Sousa de Deus, noted that the women unionists in Brazil “need to dialogue on issues and be at the center of the debate to build a just society with full participation of women and young people.” Women workers turned out in force to support recent social mobilizations calling for faster action to address the lingering and deep inequalities that still exist in Brazil, despite a decade of significant and successful anti-poverty strategies. These mobilizations were “completely different than other mobilizations over the last 30 years, with participation of 5 million workers, women and men.”

Women (and some men) are transforming leadership.

- Forming their own unions, where women workers’ voices, needs and priorities take center stage, is an essential element of an overall strategy of improving worker rights. One of the oldest and most successful examples is the Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) founded in India in 1972. Now with 1.7 million members in 14 Indian states, it is the largest women’s union in the world. Geeta Koshi, coordinator for SEWA’s legal department, says the union began with five women, who went door to door to determine women’s priorities and build trust with them and their families. This outreach formed the basis of their methodology, and from there, women were trained to do similar outreach in their communities.
- Transforming organizational culture, which tends to be male-dominated and hierarchical across most sectors, is essential in the union context as well. In South Africa, four unions, recognizing that their internal culture does not easily address issues such as gender-based violence and discrimination, partnered with Gender at Work and the Labour Research Service for a unique process to develop alternative models of building inclusive worker power. Among the projects’ tangible results: union activists—male and female—reported that the process reinvigorated and re-inspired them, even in the face of wide-scale workplace restructuring, deteriorating working conditions, internal union strife and an all-out assault on labor rights in South Africa by employers. Increasing numbers of women joined the unions, more women ran for leadership positions and female and male union leadership gained a deeper understanding of worker concerns and became more accountable in addressing them.
- In Mexico, the women-led *Comité Fronterizo de Obreros* (Border Workers Committee, CFO) is using popular education and feminist social mobilization to empower women on factory production line to speak out

against violations of their rights as workers and as women. Working in a unique partnership with Mexico's powerful Miners' and Metalworkers' Union, a male-majority union, CFO is bringing women and men together in new ways to understand and fight for worker rights in both male and female-dominated sectors.

Women are transforming their unions.

- In the formal and informal economy, women workers are grounding their labor rights activism in a vision and practice of working women's rights, gender equality and social and economic justice for all. Dorothy Sue Cobble, a labor historian from the United States, reminded participants of how our labor union foremothers forged a distinctive and global vision of social change, and built a global working women's movement that pursued the full development of each individual, saw individual and collective progress as intertwined and sought to dismantle multiple areas of economic inequality. In her current research, Cobble looked at available data in 39 countries, representing some 80 percent of the world's union membership. She found a "feminization" of trade union membership—in one-third of the countries studied, women are now the new majority of trade unionists. In two-thirds of the countries studied, the percentage of women's labor union membership matched or exceeded their representation in the labor force.
- Gertrude Mtsweni, national gender coordinator for the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), shared how women unionists pushed for creation of a full-time gender coordinator position and gender coordinator chairpersons throughout COSATU. The federation also integrates gender issues in collective bargaining and wages campaigns on a variety of issues crucial for women, including prevention of workplace sexual harassment and violence and creation of child care facilities. Quotas for women's participation in elections and union structures were noted to have been very successful over the long term in South Africa, Brazil and Hong Kong in increasing women's power and influence in union decision-making bodies. The CUT in Brazil has moved from a percentage quota to parity, creating more space for women in leadership—although there are still limited numbers of women at the highest levels of leadership. Term limits is another critical mechanism for enhancing the number of women in leadership, as are constitutional amendments. Khamati Mugalla, General Secretary of the East Africa Trade Union Confederation, reported women's success in amending EATUC's constitution to create space and support for women's leadership.
- Young women are organizing to bring their particular issues to the fore, claiming space for young women's leadership, and providing vital new skills and approaches to labor movements. In countries as diverse as Kenya and Ukraine, young women experience higher levels of unemployment and job insecurity, lower wages and fewer training opportunities than young male workers, despite their relatively higher levels of education. They also face government and labor market practices that entrench, rather than uproot, this discrimination. The Confederation of Free Trade Unions of Ukraine (KPVU) is educating young workers on their rights, and women and youth are joining forces to protest bad wages and working conditions, and are proposing legislation to support work and families. The East African Trade Union Confederation recently instituted constitutional provisions related to women and young workers to enhance their voice in the union.

Women are working to complete the "unfinished business of the labor movement."

A major piece of unfinished business is addressing the relative scarcity of male workers and union leaders fully in the struggle for women's rights and gender equality. Nhlanhla Mabizela of the Solidarity Center (South Africa) reminded participants that patriarchy harms men as well as women, and suggested that men needed to listen to discussions about these issues to facilitate progress. Participants also noted the importance of greatly expanding education, organizing and activism—including a focus on forces in the global economy—in a way that connects and integrates the heart, mind and body in our struggle for rights and gender equality. Relatedly, participants highlighted the need to better integrate an understanding of and support for reproductive rights, including maternity and paternity rights, and the necessity of work/life balance for all workers, all of which were prevalent themes throughout the workshop.