

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

How We End Gender-Based Violence at Work

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Brenda Modise, Social Justice Officer, FEDUSA, South Africa

Brenda Modise:

It was a breathtaking moment. We all shed tears. It was tears of joy. Because remember when we went into that room as workers of the world, we knew what we wanted, but we didn't know if the business constituents of the world understand where we are coming from.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, brothers and sisters. And welcome to the very first episode of the Solidarity Center Podcast, an interview show that highlights and celebrates the individuals working for labor rights, the freedom to form unions and democracy across the globe. I'm your host, Shawna Bader-Blau. I'm also the executive director of the Solidarity Center, the largest international worker rights organization in the United States. Solidarity Center works in more than 60 countries to help unions and worker organizations overcome the challenges that are all too familiar to workers: poverty, wages, lack of legal protections, discrimination and outright abuse. Worldwide, one of the most rampant forms of human rights violations involves sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. Much of this occurs at the workplace. We don't have global data because so little has been done to address this issue at work. But the information we have shows this abuse is absolutely widespread.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

In Sri Lanka, many women working on tea plantations have experienced or witnessed sexual or physical abuse at their workplace. In Bangladesh, more than half of female garment workers have been intimidated or threatened with violence at work. And in the US, 90 percent of women in food service have experienced sexual harassment or violence on the job. Those figures are staggering. Sexual harassment and gender based violence at work happens in every type of workplace and in every country. And when it happens at work, it can repress women's voice and power. It can terrorize workers and prevent them from speaking up or from joining unions. And when workers feel powerless, employers can get away with unsafe workplaces, low wages and worse. And that's why the labor movement led by union women is determined to end gender-based violence and harassment at work. Today, we are talking with one of those activists, Brenda Modise. Brenda is the social justice officer at the Federation of Unions of South Africa, FEDUSA.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

FEDUSA is a federation of unions that represent healthcare workers, educational professionals, public employees, transport workers and more. Brenda has first-hand experience with a unique campaign to get the global community to adopt an international treaty on violence and harassment at work. It's called Convention 190 or simply, C190. It would help workers, employers and governments everywhere take action to stop this abuse. Through this work, she's seen the South African labor movement come together with feminist and human rights organizations in a nationwide effort to demand an end to gender based violence. She'll share her insight into why unions are uniquely able to assist workers in overcoming workplace structures that permit and perpetuate discrimination and harassment. Our conversation with Brenda begins with a discussion of why C190 is such an important tool for codifying worker protections and improving labor rights, and the impact it's had since 2019.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Can we just start by having you introduce yourself, your name and your title?

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Brenda Modise:

Good afternoon colleagues. My name is Brenda Modise. I'm the social policy and gender officer for the Federation of Unions of South Africa, FEDUSA.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Brenda, you and I know each other most recently from our joint work around Convention 190 and the global fight against violence and harassment in the world of work. And I wanted to ask you, what is Convention 190? And why is it important?

Brenda Modise:

Convention 190 is one of the tools that will assist us in terms of making sure the world of work are protected. And it will also assist countries with tools to be able to deal with gender based violence. If the convention is implemented very well by countries, it will actually give us a better platform to deal with gender-based violence in the world of work. And Convention 190 will cover existing gaps in all national legislations that we have in our own countries.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And I know there was a long multi-year process leading up to the achievement of the convention and you were a part of that. Could you tell us a little bit about the process leading up to Convention 190, and what role did you play?

Brenda Modise:

We had to make sure that governments, business constituencies in countries do agree that we want a convention that is supplemented by a recommendation on violence and harassment in the world of work. And our role as the trade union, as myself as well is to make sure that FEDUSA members do support and understand that it is important for them to participate and advocate for the convention on the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And what does the convention really mean by violence and harassment in the world of work? I think people in many countries might be more familiar with the term sexual harassment, or they might think that this convention is only about women. I wonder if you could tell us a little bit about, what is violence and harassment in the world of work?

Brenda Modise:

Well, I would say violence and harassment in the world of work will also include sexual harassment. And the reason why we're not talking about women, we're all talking about gender because we think violence and harassment does not only happen to women only, it happens on all workers irrespective of your gender. In terms of sexual harassment, it was also leaned towards women. But with this convention, we're trying to address violence that is geared towards workers. It doesn't matter whether you're a man, a woman, old, young, LGBTQI community or anyone, but we are addressing violence and harassment in the world of work against all workers. And that is why we wanted it to be world of work and gender-based violence.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

And Brenda, I know you work regionally with women activists across Africa and also through the Global Labor Movement. But you have a long history of working on gender equality, also in South Africa, in your home country. And I wondered if you could tell us why is this convention important in South Africa specifically?

Brenda Modise:

Yeah, it is very important in South Africa on the number of points that I can raise. One is that, in most of the time when you look at bosses or company owners, it's mostly men. And when young people are applying for jobs, that's where you would meet violence and harassment, but in the form of sexual harassment. You would find that for you to get employed, there are certain favors that you need to do as a woman. And also if it's a woman, it's also vice versa. And I think it is important to address the imbalances and inequalities that exist within the workplace, especially now in this case, especially against women.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Are there particular sectors in South Africa that you have observed violence and harassment affecting workers disproportionately?

Brenda Modise:

Yes. There would be, even though all sectors will be affected or impacted by violence and harassment in the world of work. But there are those that are very key in this instance, your retail workers, your health sector workers, and all other sectors, but the most important ones would be your retail workers, your health sector workers, where in South Africa we had recorded cases where the retail industry, they normally knock off very late at night, and they have to travel from work to home, and employers do not provide transport for workers to be able to go home. So the transport that they use it's not safe. They are normally violated in the taxis, they're violated in the trains, or any transport that they would use. But in the case of the health workers is that the space that they're working in, it's also not safe as sometimes they would be raped in the hospital or outpatient. Or sometimes they would be raped on their way to and from work. So it's mostly those sectors that are really affected mostly, but it does not leave other sectors as well.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And when you're talking about transportation, workers going to and from work as a site of violence, does Convention C190 address transportation and other locations that workers are present beyond just the workplace?

Brenda Modise:

Yes, it does. Especially the fact that the convention does not talk about workplace, but it talks about world of work. So it means that workers transiting from and to work, they will be protected either by the employer or by government. And in that way, there should be policies or legislation that will guide in terms of how should employers and government regulate that space. But the convention only gives a framework in terms of how as the trade unions and work and businesses should regulate the space. But

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for the fact that they acknowledge world of work, it gives us a plus in a sense that workers will be protected wherever they have breaks, wherever they have seminars, wherever they go for meetings, they'll be protected because that space should be regarded as world of work.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Brenda, when you mentioned healthcare sector and retail, I was thinking about people working in hospitals, nurses, service providers in hospitals, doctors, pharmacists, and you were talking about the presence of sexual harassment and even rape in hospitals and in transportation and retail. And as a leader and as an activist in South Africa for gender equality, what are some of the strategies that you have used in your work to try to mitigate against and stop that extreme violence against women and workers?

Brenda Modise:

One of the strategies that we have used is that, as FEDUSA we've developed a gender policy. And the gender policy will bring together a sexual harassment policy, that we didn't want to have a gender policy separating violence and sexual harassment policy. So in that way, we don't have two separate policies that addresses the same issue. And with what we have now as the C190 and recommendation is that, we are hoping our government will try and make sure that they incorporate all the legislation. South Africa has already started in terms of the national strategic plan on dealing with gender-based violence. And they've also started developing a code of good practice on dealing with violence, eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work and incorporating it into the Employment Equity Act to include what the Convention 190 seeks to address.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So gender-based violence and violence against people at work will be discussed with business, government, labor and other stakeholders in a high level, serious multi-stakeholder discussion. But I also know from watching you and the activists of the labor movement and the women's movement in South Africa that the struggle against gender-based violence is broad and wide. It includes labor and it includes other kinds of women's and feminist organizations. And I wonder if you could just talk about the grassroots coalitions in South Africa that have come together to demand an end of gender-based violence in the society.

Brenda Modise:

Yeah. Women in South Africa in 2017, 2018, they came together and they called themselves a Total Shutdown Movement. And they planned that they're going to shut the country down on the first of August that year. And they wanted the president to come and account to them and also take into cognizance the importance of addressing violence and harassment against their women and femicide. And it's that particular movement that saw the birth of the national strategic plan on dealing with gender-based violence.

Brenda Modise:

And it's that movement that made sure that it brings together all women of South Africa, irrespective of your color, irrespective of your political affiliation, irrespective of your union movement. But it brought women together to make sure that they call the president to come and account to the women of South

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Africa if he is aware that there is another pandemic in a sense of gender-based violence that is ravaging women in South Africa. And in that, there was a special legislation that was launched by Department of Justice. There were three bills that the government negotiated. And in that, there was a first national gender conference that was addressed by the president of the country in November of that particular year.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So total shutdown to address violence against women. The South African Unions participated in this action?

Brenda Modise:

Yes, we did participate in it through federations were part of the bigger movement as the Total Shutdown. And it's still active even today because now there's a national gender council that is in the president's office that is going to be established. It hasn't started working, but it is in the pipeline of being implemented. As FEDUSA, we have also submitted one of our vice presidents to be part of a national gender council that is going to be headed probably by the president himself.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Brenda so, I'm just thinking about your whole life of your important work in the labor movement and in the women's movement and for women workers in South Africa, and from all you described that was achieved as a result of this movement in the country and the total shutdown effort and the effort of unions to try to get C190 ratified. How does that feel? How did that feel for you to get that far?

Brenda Modise:

It really feels great, even though the bigger work has not yet started. We really want South Africa to ratify the convention. And I already know that the work is not going to be ending at ratification. It's also going to go in terms of, after ratification, what next. And that's where the bigger role and our activism is going to be needed. And we need to put more effort as the women in South Africa to make sure that whatever that we have fought for is going to be realized in South Africa and be incorporated into our own legislation, and make sure that it is implemented.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

After the break. We'll revisit the historic day in 2019 that Convention 190 was celebrated, and discuss the labor movement's role in holding government and employers accountable to the convention.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I wanted to just take a minute to celebrate the Convention C190 that was achieved and I know you were there in Geneva. Can you tell me about that? What was that moment like?

Brenda Modise:

It was a breathtaking moment. We all shed tears. It was tears of joy. Because remember when we went into that room as workers of the world, we knew what we wanted, but we didn't know if the business constituents of the world understand where we are coming from. Because they thought workers wanted

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more responsibility towards the protection of workers, but it was not really the case. And when the chairperson said, "We now have the convention," and he repeat that... And we all sang, and it was for the first time that in UN you would have a singing. And the noise that we had as workers, it was only the workers' side. And it was for the first time that workers would sit in the negotiations from 7 a.m. to 3 a.m. at night. So it really showed that we were very serious, and we really wanted the convention.

Brenda Modise:

We hoped that South Africa would be the first to ratify the convention, but unfortunately we were overtaken by Namibia, it has ratified the convention. But we are hoping that by the end of this year, South Africa would have ratified the convention because everywhere, when the President Cyril Ramaphosa speaks about something, he also mentions the political will that the South African government has in ratifying Convention 190. And even when he announced the lockdown now, with the second wave, he also mentioned that they're eager and willing to ratify the convention. We are holding him on those words and making sure that we would remind him every time we meet with him, that we are still waiting for you to ratify the convention and make our job a bit easy for us to take the process of GBV forward.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I remember in Geneva that the bloc of African nations were very united as governments in support of a strong convention and recommendation on eliminating violence and harassment in the world of work. And I remember also the labor movement was of course the most joyous, and absolutely broke out in song. (singing)

Brenda Modise:

Yeah, we are ready for the convention. We are ready for conventioning. That's the song. Yes. That's the song.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

But I also remember talking to you at the time and I've also read some quotes of yours since then, and I heard you at one point say something like, "The job does not start and end here, but it's the beginning of a bigger job. Once we've got the convention, it's the beginning of a bigger job." You have started to speak just now about holding the South African government accountable to its commitment, to ratify Convention 190. What is the role of unions specifically now, in making that happen?

Brenda Modise:

The role of union is very big. At FEDUSA, what we have done is that we have launched a campaign that is called C190Can. With that campaign, we are promoting the ratification and education of C190. The vision of the campaign, however, does not go beyond just the ratification, but it's also keeping an eye on the eventual application to the South African laws and regulations. The C190Can that we have launched, it's a live website that we have as FEDUSA. Even if you can click on it as you go in now, you will see that it's a live campaign. You can join the campaign at C190Can. It's a live campaign that we're using and we're hoping that with this we'll be keeping our government on toes. This campaign was launched on the ninth of August 2020. We also held a webinar on the 14th of August 2020, where we called in the minister again, to come and account to workers of FEDUSA to say, what is the delay?

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Brenda Modise:

What are the stumbling blocks for them to ratify this convention? So as FEDUSA we are still continuing with the campaigns to ratify C190 and the implementation and education towards it. So we also had a high level webinar to call the ministers, Minister of Department of Employment and Labor, Minister of International Relations, Minister of Justice, Minister of Women and Children, to come and account and also tell us what is the link between the National Strategic Plan on GBV and Convention 190. Can they work together? And all the other legislation that Department of Justice has released in terms of gender, can they work together? Can they find one another? So that we should not have legislations working separately, but we have legislations that are working together in the country. And before then, the President of South Africa had already launched a court that is specifically dealing with the gender issue, your violence, your rape, all other issues. So it's a separate court that has to deal with violence that is geared towards women or towards men.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And you mentioned that this is a bunch of really critically important high level pressure on employers and government. You mentioned as part of it, FEDUSA and the unions are doing education as well with the community and with workers. Can you tell me a little bit about, how do you raise awareness with workers about C190 and sexual harassment and gender based violence?

Brenda Modise:

We are raising awareness in terms of posters, in terms of social media platforms that we have. We also have male gender champions that are also assisting us because we thought women cannot be talking to women, but would rather have men also talking to men, men who find themselves to be feminists, who understand that there are patriarchal issues that they need to address. And people, they need to understand that gender-based violence is not affecting only women, but it's, as the word says, gender. And also as FEDUSA we have also brought in the issues of the LGBTQI community to say, we need to recognize that they are also violated, either by not recognizing them as the LGBTQI, and also the infrastructure that is not conducive to be able to work effectively in the world of work. It's either you're a man or you're the woman. So it does not recognize the fact that there would be an LGBTQI community in the workplace. That is why in Geneva, we had to trade off the fact of listing the vulnerable groups, but allowing the fact that we need to have vulnerable groups in the convention, rather than listing.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So the convention covers a broad array of vulnerable groups instead of naming them all, so that it can be accommodating to different cultures and different societies. That's such an important achievement. I wonder when you're doing direct outreach with workers, and you're talking directly with workers in these, union members about gender-based violence and harassment and the convention and the laws, how are workers responding?

Brenda Modise:

Positively because in the past, things that they thought it's a normal, they now realize that it's actually harassment or violence, raising some eyebrows to say, some of the things that I took for granted, they're violating my rights as a woman or as a man, as a worker. So it's actually raising an awareness and also saying to them, you can actually file a case of violence and harassment. It also gives us an opportunity as

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a trade union movement to start preparing workers on how to deal with these issues and how to identify violence in the world of work.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

So when you think about your longtime work in the labor movement, working hard, making achievements in the advancement of equality for women, you talked about dismantling patriarchy, you talked about coalitions with the feminist groups, you talked about new laws and legislation, making it real. If you think five years from now, or 10 years from now, what does success look like to you? What is the future of work that inspires you, that you are fighting for?

Brenda Modise:

The future of work that inspires me, it's a workplace free of violence and harassment. It's a workplace that one would go in and be able to work freely without thinking about her domestic violence issues or harassment in the world of work. I'm thinking about a decent work and decent life for all that will make sure that workers are protected in terms of salary, environment and everything. So for me, it's a workplace free of violence and harassment, irrespective of men or women, young or old.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

It's a really beautiful image. And I really want to know, what inspires you? What keeps you going?

Brenda Modise:

Personally, I think my family. I mean, I've got a very supportive husband. I've got two girls that are also keeping me on my toes, because they ask me so many questions.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I wonder if there's anything you would like to share or that you think people need to know.

Brenda Modise:

The special thing about this convention is that it brings women together across the world, irrespective of your language, irrespective of your culture, irrespective of all the things. When you saw workers in Geneva or anywhere, and when we start to talk about C190, you can see the emotions. It cut across. It doesn't matter whether you speak English, you speak Portuguese, you speak French, or you speak Español, or you speak ... It brings us together. As soon as you say C190, it brings women together, and it makes a force to be reckoned with.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

A force to be reckoned with indeed. Unfortunately, our connection to South Africa went down before I could properly thank her. But let me share my appreciation for Brenda Modise's work now. She is a true hero of the movement, and the work she is doing today through the C190Can campaign, through her work to ensure government and employer accountability in South Africa, through her outreach to the LGBTQ plus communities, all of that will be felt for generations to come. My heartfelt solidarity with all our brothers and sisters in the labor movement in South Africa. And I'm so grateful to Brenda for taking the time to share her story. One thing I want to highlight from my conversation with Brenda is that

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despite what a powerful tool C190 can be, there are still many governments that have yet to ratify it and turn it into law. Labor will continue to lead on this issue.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Brenda and union activists all over the world are right now pressing governments and employers to ratify and codify the human rights outlined in C190. Together, we are creating a world of work that is free from violence and harassment in all its forms, because violence is not part of the job for any of us. Thanks one more time to my guest, Brenda Modise, the social justice officer at the Federation of Unions of South Africa. You can learn more about South Africa's campaign to ratify Convention 190 at c190can.org, and on social media @C190CAN. Tune in next week when we talk to Maximiliano Garcez in Brazil and Sergei Antusevich in Belarus. Both men are key figures in the labor movements of their home countries. And we'll hear about the powerful ways they are organizing for workers' rights as well as social change.

Maximiliano Garcez:

This is not anything new in the world. There is a famous speech by Salvador Allende in the UN, in which he denounces the growing power of corporations eroding democracy, which only got worse.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

This podcast is a production of thestoryproducer.com, with executive producer Tyler Greene and producer and engineer Adam Yoffe. The Solidarity Center Podcast is a member of the DC Labor Radio Podcast Network. A special thanks to the staff of the Solidarity Center who assisted with this podcast. In more than 60 countries around the world, we work to ensure a righteous future for workers, dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For the Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.