

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

'I Feel Strong When I See Other Women with Us'

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guest: Rita Goyit, head of Nigeria Labor Congress (NLC) Department of Women and Youth

Rita Goyit:

Children are there, their families. And then people take advantage of the women workers including minors. So we discovered that there was no code of conduct whether on sexual harassment or the gender-based violence of any kind in the market before.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello sisters and brothers and welcome to The Solidarity Center Podcast. The 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 in Washington D.C. We're the largest U.S.-based international worker rights organization. We empower workers to raise their voice for dignity on the job, for justice in their communities and for greater equality in the global economy. And for one just future. We talked with some of our guests last season about an international treaty on violence and harassment at work called Convention 190 or simply C190. It would help workers, employers and governments everywhere stop sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence. We heard how workers and their unions are campaigning to get their governments to ratify C190 so that it will be enforced in their countries.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

But even before governments act on C190, some unions are taking steps to ensure workers benefit from the incredibly powerful rights it provides. In Lesotho, a country next to South Africa, a coalition of unions and women's and workers' rights organizations worked with a factory owner and major retail brands to create a worker centered program to address rampant gender-based violence and harassment at five garment factories. These agreements create a code of conduct on unacceptable behavior and an independent system for reporting abuse, along with a comprehensive education and awareness program for workers and supervisors. And in Nigeria, where unions are also making C190 real, textile workers, market vendors and others are gaining a stronger voice at work. My guest today, Rita Goyit will tell us how. Rita leads the Nigeria Labor Congress's Department of Women and Youth and is the Secretary of the NLC's National Women's Commission.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

But before we begin, I want to mention a couple of our upcoming episodes. In December, we'll talk with a worker rights advocate from Sri Lanka who is part of a campaign to raise awareness about wage theft and how it impacts untold numbers of people who migrate for work but who are not paid or are forced to work long hours with no days off. And next year, we'll speak with actor and activist, Gabrielle Carteris about the work of the International Federation of Actors or FIA. Gabrielle was recently elected president of FIA which represents hundreds of thousands of performers in more than 60 countries and advocates to improve the working conditions and advance the economic and social rights of performers. Now, let's welcome Rita Goyit. Rita Goyit in Nigeria with the Nigerian Labor Congress, welcome to the podcast.

Rita Goyit:

Thank you very much sister Shawna.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Over the course of this podcast, we've been doing a lot of coverage of Convention C190, the great new convention at the international level. It's a treaty that says there should be no more violence and

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harassment in the world of work. One thing we know is that violence and harassment exists in the world of work and gender-based violence is extremely common in workplaces. You've been doing some surveys and speaking to workers in Lagos and Abuja. I know you spoke to maybe 900 workers or so. I wonder if you could tell us, what were some of the results of that survey? What did you learn when you talked to these workers?

Rita Goyit:

Yeah, first of all, I would say I'm excited being on this program and once more to see excited about the Convention C190 and all that it has for us as workers and ensuring that we have a workplace that is free from any form of violence and harassment. And to say that once that convention was adopted we were excited and started work immediately because before then we were doing advocacy in support. And once it was adopted, we continued to strengthen that campaign to make sure ratification. But when we got to the level of discussions as pertaining ratification, then when we had this challenge. The challenge is that yes, people always want to deny the existence of gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace even though we know of its prevalence and all of that. So we needed to do something to come out with some evidence to show that it exists.

Rita Goyit:

So we decided to do research with the support of the Solidarity Center and using the Lagos Mile 12 market. But the research, there were 19 women that went up for this research. At the end of the day, we were able to interview 919. We were consciously trying to break the silence of this gender-based violence and the lack of awareness that is there. The result that we found was really, really amazing because we now discover that there is no place free from gender-based violence and harassment that existed in all. Because first as the women together, we developed the questionnaire, we brought the questions that we wanted and then we tested it. And the research results were amazing. No age or sector is free from the menace of gender-based violence. About the 57.5 percent of the 919 women interviewed experience gender-based violence at work.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

57 percent, Rita?

Rita Goyit:

Yes, yeah at work. And then about 52.2 percent had been threatened either by text messages or verbally or on their way to or from work. And we discovered all of that. And also one of the things that was also of importance to us that time, though this was happening, the level of reporting was low. So we also asked the question, "Why was the level of reporting low?" And we found out that the women workers were afraid of losing their jobs and they're also afraid of losing their relationship.

Rita Goyit:

And they also said before now, when the report, nothing is done, nothing seems to be there. They thought it was not important. That they were also afraid, fear of victimization. And also we also found out that one out of every five women interviewed did not report because they were confused. They didn't know what to do. So this research was an eyeopener for women that look, there's something that can be done. There's a lot of confidentiality as far as the issue of gender-based violence is. And that you can talk to sisters like we talk to and all of that, and talk to the National Women Commission as well.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

I was curious, though, before we get into a little more discussion about what can the labor movement do to address gender-based violence and harassment at work, I'm really struck by these high numbers. And I know that that's not just Nigeria, it's common all over the world that the presence of violence against women is so high at work. When you are talking about numbers as high as like 57 percent of women experiencing harassment. And at the same time, learning for the first time that 20 percent or more never report what happens to them. This is really powerful information for workers' rights advocates to have and for the labor movement to have so that we can do something with it. I wonder if you could tell us from these 919 interviews in Abuja and Lagos, what were some of the stories women told you about violence and harassment? Does anything stand out to you? What were common across the stories?

Rita Goyit:

What was common about the story is that sexual harassment, gender-based violence exists in the workplace. And then it happens and it was not treated as a workplace issue. For some of them, it was treated like, oh, this is just women issue and you have no data to show that it was happening. And then for some of them it was affecting their work. And sometimes they cannot put in their best. Some of them said that in fact, when they wake up in the morning and it is time to go to work, it was like, oh no, not again. Going back to that place to face the same person who is harassing you at the workplace and then you are afraid. You cannot talk about it because you're afraid of losing your job. You're afraid of being victimized. You're afraid of also this stigmatization and all of that.

Rita Goyit:

And then some of them suffer a lack of promotion. Some of them who said no, they cannot deal with it discovered they are stagnated in one place when promotions come because sometimes maybe it's the supervisor. So because of that they're unable to get a promotion. They are also unable to put in their best. And sometimes they are sent on trips they're unsolicited for. And these trips are just to accompany the male, their male counterpart so that they will have an opportunity to harass the women. And sometimes also the way they're being addressed, they're called derogatory names when that happens. Like when you are going for a meeting and the woman worker is to go along, they call them extra baggage. They call them names and make sexist comments that they're very uncomfortable with. And then also say that sometimes the male counterparts don't know where to draw the line between making a compliment and also making what is derogatory and sexist comment.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

You said derogatory statements, sexist comments and yet also feeling fear and nervousness about reporting because they don't know what's going to happen if I report it, is there going to be retaliation against me? Will anything happen to the perpetrator? And really powerful that you and our sisters in the labor movement in Nigeria reached out worker to worker to these women workers to get their stories.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Rita gave us a stunning description of how widespread gender-based violence is for women at the workplace. And yet there are so many barriers to reporting this abuse, like the fear of losing out on promotions or even being fired from your job. Because for so long gender-based violence hasn't been considered a workplace issue. That's why the C190 treaty is so important. When we return, we'll find out

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how unions and their partners in Nigeria are putting C190 strong protections in place to stop this of abuse.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hi there, it's Shawna again. I just wanted to take a minute to invite you to check out RadioLabour, the international labor movement's radio service. RadioLabour produces daily newscasts about union events and issues. And it also produces special programs to support labor campaigns around the world. Check out Radio Labor at R-A-D-I-O-L-A-B-O-U-R.net and find out more about worker rights struggles around the world and how the movement is supporting their efforts for decent wages, fair treatment and strong communities. Follow and subscribe at radiolabour.net.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Earlier when we were talking you mentioned Mile 12 market in Lagos. And I wonder if you could tell us about that market.

Rita Goyit:

It's an international market especially for people in West Africa. And so that means you also have migrant workers that are there in that market. Children are there, their families and then people take advantage of the women workers, including minors. So we discovered that there was no code of conduct, whether on sexual harassment or gender-based violence of any kind in the market before. That people are free to come in and put in whatever cases of gender-based violence that they have suffered in the market they can do. And then we train the leaders of the market, the women and also the men and also the union because the amalgamated union is also affiliated to the Nigeria Labor Congress. So we work together with them and then the NLC, National Women Commission and the NLC in Lagos to be able to do that.

Rita Goyit:

And that was because and then we translated the anti-GBV code into the different languages, the language that they understand. And that for us was the turning point because now you could hear in the language. And we also work with them to develop materials and jingles add in them in the local language and all of that. And then I would say that because of the awareness raised and the anti-GBV task force that we had, we were able to have a test case of a man of about 44 who defiled a minor of 15. And the case was taken to court. And because of the networking, especially with the International Lawyers Assisting Workers, the case was taken to court. And I will say that in fact it's one of the cases that we're celebrating because we're able to get the justice and the man has been remanded in the prisons which I think serves as a deterrent.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I mean, Rita, that story gives me the chills to think about that accomplishment. I think a lot of listeners have heard words like sexual harassment or violence against women. And when they think about that at work it might be different people thinking about formal workplaces, offices, factories. But you did this work in a market that millions of people visit a year at any one time, not an organized workplace like people might imagine. And yet finding women, interviewing them, learning their experiences and then working together to generate education and awareness and posters and jingles and songs on the radio

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that educated people about unacceptable behavior. The idea that transformed into a legal case against a man who perpetrated violence against a young woman is a very, very powerful outcome. I wonder since that happened Rita, have you spoken with more women in that market? Are they aware of the changes that are coming as a result?

Rita Goyit:

Yes, we've been able to talk to some of them because the chairperson of Lagos is also a woman so it is easy for them to relate with. So we were able to share with them, especially when the judgment we got this judgment and there was a lot of jubilation, people were happy. Now they know that, yes, they can report and something will be done. And it was also very strategic for us because the informal sector workers most times people don't prioritize their issues. And because of the C190 that covers everybody, every workplace, we have to serve especially those of us in NLC as a voice to the voiceless because most of the time there is nobody to listen to their story. What we had to listen to their stories and went through it all and we developed this together with them and we have continued. And in fact recently I spoke to one of them and she was asking, "When are you people coming to the market again to do something?"

Rita Goyit:

And we are hoping that now, maybe during the 16 Days of Activism we meet that market again to share our victory with them again about the case and also to find out where we are and where do we go from here. That was also very strategic for us was taking a workplace from the textile and that is Haffar industrial company. And that is a private-sector company. And we were able to penetrate into the company because first we were able to meet with the leadership. So we had a leadership training for the textile workers and they were very enthusiastic about it. And they said, yes, this is something they could partner with us to do. Also that one of the workers had shared with us that they had suffered gender-based violence in that workplace and that they were afraid. So after training the leadership, the leadership now decided to set a committee which was quite strategic because a smaller committee of people from the union and people from workplace and also including supervisors which was quite strategic because sometimes the supervisors are the ones.

Rita Goyit:

And so it gave a sense of belonging. So people talked freely and some of the things that agreed upon in that workplace was the establishment of clearly between workplace policy on the gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace, the provision of materials, posters and also having messages to say that that company has zero policy tolerance on gender-based violence which was conspicuously put and with the suggestion boxes and of course a commitment from the management to address the issue of discrimination against female workers on the issue of promotion. And also the textile union has also gone ahead to take concrete steps to be able to amend their constitution to include the language of C190 in it. And hopefully, also, to have it in the collective bargaining agreement.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

It's really important that we're talking about these concrete examples of ways that workers in a formal workplace like a factory or in an informal workplace like a market. In either case, unions and worker advocates are coming together to talk to women, understand their real stories, their real experiences and then make concrete change. That's the dream of these international treaties like Convention C190

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to eradicate violence and harassment in the world of work it's that we make those dreams that are in those global treaties and those global agreements, that we make them real and concrete for workers on the ground. And only unions can do that. Unions talking directly with workers about their experiences and finding ways to fix it, to stop this horrible human rights abuse that is violence against workers and especially including gender-based violence. And Rita, it takes me back a little bit earlier in this interview when you were talking about the methodology that you used to learn about what was happening with workers in your 900 interviews.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And I just want to ask you, these stories you're sharing about what women experience at work, the threats, the demeaning words, the fact that fear and intimidation keeps them from reporting. I bet as you and your sisters doing the interviews, when you heard those stories they must have really been impacting you. You must have felt a sense of a duty of course to treat their story seriously but also impacted you and your heart. Can you tell me for the people doing the interviews, did you work on how to handle the feelings that might come up for them when they're doing these interviews on these very difficult subjects?

Rita Goyit:

Yeah, thank you very much Shawna ,for asking that question because even when the women that went for the interview came back, some of them shared this experience because sometimes you might be reading stories. You can hear people write stories but we give somebody one on one and you are talking, the emotions that come with it and all of that. And also the trust, the person is saying, okay, this is confidential because this happens in our workplace, in our organization, but I don't want them to know that I am the one that shared this experience. But if it is coming as a collective from the women workers, then something that you would be comfortable talking about it. And this is very, very important. So at least that level of trust has been established. And also most importantly, that spirit of sisterhood. That building process when we get this information and yes, when eventually C190 is ratified in Nigeria it is going to be implemented because these are some of the concerns that were raised and that we have also shared with the leadership of the NLC.

Rita Goyit:

And that is why we are taking concrete measures to say while we wait for the ratification, there are things that we need to do. We are thinking globally but we're acting locally because what is it that works for us as the Nigerian women workers and what works in Union A might not work in Union B. And that is why we have to pick out what works in the public-sector union, private-sector union and the informal sector union. So a blend of all these strategies that we really address gender-based violence in the workplace because this is a worker specific issue. It's coming from we, the workers ourselves, it is not somebody who is coming from somewhere to tell us. We are telling our stories by ourselves.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Rita, what you're describing is so powerful. This is a form of repression, of silencing women. It's repressive and discriminatory and unions are about liberation and freedom and equality. And when we're able to directly address violence and harassment in the world of work, we are playing our true role in helping bring about decent work with dignity. And Rita, what inspires you? I know you've been

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doing this work for a long time. You're really important feminist labor leader in the country, in the region. What has inspired you to do this work all these years?

Rita Goyit:

Yeah, first of all is that I feel really excited that I'm working together with other sisters because I feel strong when I see the other women around in our campaigns, in the negotiations that we do. And now I can also see women breaking ground in terms of rising up to the top leadership, which is so, so, so, so important because once they're the apex leadership, they're also able to put our issues strongly that also is an inspiration for me.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Well no small part because women like you are leading the way for the rest of us. And I just really want to honor and lift that up and thank you for sharing this absolutely inspiring story. Before we close, is there anything else that we didn't talk about that you'd like to share with our listeners?

Rita Goyit:

Yeah one of the things that I really find about this project, the research and the campaign for the ratification of C190 that we've done, is to be able to link up with other civil society groups, other NGOs of like mind, but also most importantly and strategically it's the media. We have been able to break through with the media and now we understand the way we work, the right way we want it done because they now have a better understanding. And the most interesting part of it is that most of them are men. So it is not like they are women but they're men because they understand the issues so they go with. And sometimes they come on their own in the office that they meet me and say, "Rita, is there anything, are we making progress? What else are we doing?"

Rita Goyit:

And then I also want to say that the NLC, National Women Commission, has been on the front line for the campaign for a ratification of C190 in Nigeria. It's not yet there, but we're hopeful that it's going to be done. And this, even The Ministry of Women Affairs, the Ministry of Labor and Employment, the Ministry of Justice and even the worker organizations testify that, they said in fact, the people that have really been in the forefront for this is the NLC women. The NLC women have been to their offices for advocacy visits. We have written letters, we have done press statement, press conferences. We have created a lot of public awareness and also gotten their support because if people are not aware, then they'll not be able to support it. But once they're aware, then it is easy to win their support, to make sure that you are on the right track.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

And this is how leaders like you and the women of the labor movement of Nigeria are helping make a better world for workers in Nigeria, across West Africa and through your leadership globally. I really want to thank you for this really inspiring story Rita, thank you so much for talking to us today. Sexual harassment and other forms of gender-based violence at work are widespread. But as Rita showed us, unions have a vital role in addressing and preventing it through education, training and action. Backed by the collective strength of their unions and empowered with the knowledge and tools to stop this form of discrimination and repression, workers are ensuring their workplaces are safe, their voices are heard and all workers are treated with the dignity and the respect they deserve.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

Thanks again to my sister, Rita Goyit, an inspiring leader in the struggle to achieve gender justice and gender equality, a dedicated advocate for the right of all workers to safe, violence-free workplaces. You can follow and subscribe to The Solidarity Center Podcast on Apple Podcast, Spotify or wherever you find your shows. Learn more about the Solidarity Center at solidaritycenter.org and follow our social media on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. The Solidarity Center podcast is a member of the Labor Radio Podcast Network. And our show is produced and engineered by Adam Yoffe. 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.