

THE SOLIDARITY CENTER PODCAST

Union Women Key to Ending Gender-Based Violence at Work

Host: Shawna Bader-Blau, Solidarity Center Executive Director

Guests: Co-authors Robin Runge and Jane Pillinger; South African union activist Brenda Modise

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Hello, sisters and brothers and welcome to 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 in Washington D.C.

We're the largest US-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're coming up on November 25 and the start of 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence. This year's theme focuses on uniting and taking action to end violence against women and girls at workplaces around the world. Uniting and taking action to stop sexual harassment, violence and abuse is exactly what so many women have been doing for years, and one result is a new international treaty to end violence at work, including gender-based violence.

We've talked before on this program about Convention 190, the measure the International Labor Organization adopted in 2019 to address widespread violence and harassment at work. In this episode, we hear more about how women who work at factories, on farms and restaurants, taxis, offices, and more got together to make it happen. Jane Pillinger and Robin Runge spoke with some of the amazing women who spent years campaigning at the global, local, and workplace levels to build momentum for C190.

These women's stories are in their new book, *Stopping Gender-Based Violence and Harassment at Work: The Campaign for an ILO Convention*. During this year's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in honor of Giving Tuesday, by donating \$100 to the Solidarity Center, you can support our work in ending gender-based violence and get a copy of the book, *Stopping Gender-Based Violence and Harassment at Work*.

Go to our website, solidaritycenter.org, and click the donate button. Later, we'll also hear from Brenda Modise, a union activist in South Africa who worked for years to ensure the ILO adopted this measure to address gender-based violence at work. First Jane and Robin.

Jane Pillinger:

We wrote the book to give voice to the power of women workers' struggles to stop gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work. And we wanted to document this unprecedented global campaign for the adoption of the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention, that's Convention 190. It's one of the most important workers' campaigns that I think all of us have witnessed in our lifetimes.

Robin Runge:

And so we wanted to document this because there are such myths and stereotypes about who's capable of doing this, right? These are garment workers, domestic workers, agricultural workers from all over the world and have been told their whole lives, "Well, you can't do that. You can't negotiate a global treaty." It's absolutely false. They did it.

Jane Pillinger:

I'm Jane Pillinger. I work as a global expert on gender-based violence in the world of work, and I've been working with trade unions and employers and governments for the last 30 years on this issue. I have an academic background in social policy.

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Robin Runge:

And my name's Robin Runge. I'm one of three co-authors of this book, along with Jane Pillinger and Chidi King entitled, Stopping Gender-Based Violence and Harassment at Work. Most recently I was the co-director of the Equality and Inclusion Department at the Solidarity Center. I now am an independent contractor and consultant focused on gender-based violence and harassment, gender and labor and employment law, and I am also a part-time professor at the George Washington University School of Law.

Jane Pillinger:

We wanted to show how the voice of women workers in this amazing campaign had had a really big impact in global policy making. And as both feminists and activists, I think we all wanted to ensure that we documented the intersectional and diverse voices of, and voices and experience and leadership of women workers in their trade unions.

Robin Runge:

We saw this as such a uniquely powerful effort that was led by women union workers in collaboration around the world with human rights organizations, feminist organizations, disability rights organizations and it's unprecedented. It went on for over a decade to really focus on eradicating gender-based violence and harassment world of work. And these workers identified that the most effective way to do that would be to establish a global labor standard because this is a global problem affecting workers all over the world.

And so the first push to get the International Labor Organization to even agree to put it on their standing-setting agenda was tremendous. And it meant that these women leaders had to, in many instances, convince their union leadership that this was a priority for all members of their unions. That actually decent work is not possible unless we eradicate gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work.

Jane Pillinger:

So what's really unique about the ILO Violence and Harassment Convention is that, I mean, first of all, it was women workers who fought for an integrated approach to violence and harassment, so it addresses violence and harassment against all workers, but with a very strong focus on gender-based violence and harassment.

And the fact that we have now an international law, a human rights principle, and that's the principle that violence and harassment is a human rights violation and abuse is quite a significant achievement and one that the workers group really, really fought very, very hard for. It covers workers who are in an informal capacity, who are in precarious work. It even covers people who are in a recruitment process. And we know how important that has been in terms of sexual harassment, particularly where women have been asked for sexual favors in return for a job, or indeed for keeping a job, or indeed for a contract being extended.

It also covers a wide definition of the world of work, which covers things like travel to and from work, as well as other activities that take place related to work, but outside of the workplace.

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Robin Runge:

And so the end result of this document is a standard that covers and provides support and protections for all workers. The workers themselves came together and defined what gender-based violence and harassment looked like for them, and in fact that is reflected in the definition of the convention. They defined what needed to happen in order for them to feel safe and for these abuses to stop. It's not enough to hold the individual who has done this accountable, but the employer creating work structures that perpetuate gender and power inequality, right, needs to be addressed as well.

Jane Pillinger:

And one of the things that's very clear is that we now have a very important convention that trade unions are using to both frame their collective bargaining agreements, their workplace policies, but also to put pressure on their governments, to introduce laws that really do put in place the legal right to a world of work free from violence and harassment.

Robin Runge:

So the Solidarity Center over a decade ago identified ending gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work as a key focus of our gender equality work, really recognizing that we can't achieve globally decent work and gender equality in the world of work unless and until gender-based violence—and then later it evolved to gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work.

And so the Solidarity Center launched a global campaign to end gender-based violence harassment that coincided with the leadership that the International Trade Union Confederation was providing through this global campaign. And so we mobilized our staff and our partners throughout the global South to really address gender-based violence and harassment.

Jane Pillinger:

So women from the global North and global South came together right across the world to come to a common agreement of really gender transformations in the world of work, but also gender transformations in their own unions.

Robin Runge:

And then after the ILO put this on their standard-setting agenda, the Solidarity Center led a group of 40 workers in 2018 and in 2019 to participate in the negotiations in Geneva that lasted two weeks on each occasion. And this work was tremendous because we brought the actual workers themselves to these spaces who had led these campaigns back in their countries to then be in that space at the United Nations and see their work reflected in the draft of these documents.

And they've now brought those experiences back with them to their work. And now they're seen, these women unionists, are now seen as true leaders in their communities, in their unions and now they're leading the efforts to implement, which is really hard. Now that the ILO has adopted the convention, the heavy lift is to take the language there and make sure that it is in their collective bargaining agreements with employers, that it is in their national laws, that they are leading the effort to get countries to amend their laws so that they can ratify the convention.

A most recent success that the Solidarity Center was involved in was in South Africa. Our partners in South Africa came back from Geneva fired up. And I have to say South Africa was a leader in the negotiations all the way through, but then our union leaders came together from COSATU and FEDUSA

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to review their existing employment laws to say, what do we need to change here to come into compliance with C190?

And one of the big things that they focused on was the definition of gender-based violence and harassment. They had a very strong law against sexual harassment, but not gender-based violence and harassment, which is inclusive of sexual harassment, but is broader. And then also their laws did not include informal workers, and so that was a huge change. South Africa has now ratified Convention 190.

So that's just one example of the tremendous leadership that the Solidarity Center has had on really supporting our union partners around the world as they do the heavy, heavy work.

Jane Pillinger:

Just to add to what Robin was saying is that what we try to do in the book is really uncover something quite profound. And that is that the campaign helped women name a problem around which there has always been silence. And it was profound also because it addressed the issues around victim blaming, around the reasons why women don't report gender-based violence and did something really important in the trade unions and became a really important organizing tool for the trade unions because women were saying, actually this is the most fundamental problem that we face. Somebody is now naming this.

So there's been a massive transformation in both the trade union responses of bringing that into trade union advocacy, but also I think really, really importantly, allowing women trade unions, enabling women to take leadership positions around the campaign and indeed in the negotiations.

Robin Runge:

This is not just sexual harassment and none of this is about sexual attraction. Let's not be confused. This is about power. I have power over you and I'm using that to exploit you in this very gendered way.

Jane Pillinger:

Convention 190 gives us something very powerful and very strong, and that brings us into the role of globalization of trade and the impact that this convention can have across global supply chains. So we're seeing that already having an impact in countries like Bangladesh and India where it's very unlikely that there'll be early ratification, but is impacting already on the garment sector and indeed also the electronic sector.

Robin Runge:

And I think to pick up on that, Jane, the very first binding legal agreement where we saw the language from Convention 190 and particular definition of gender-based violence and harassment incorporated was in Lesotho in these agreements that the Solidarity Center helped negotiate in even before the convention was adopted by the IOL.

And in these first of its kind agreements between garment manufacturers, workers' rights organizations, three wonderful unions and two women's rights organizations, and three brands, three global brands. And they all came together and I think really importantly agreed that there needed to be a worker-led model to eradicate gender-based violence and harassment in these factories, in these garment factories in Lesotho. And so following the model in C190, not just the definition of gender-based violence and harassment, but the model of worker-led right interventions that are gender responsive.

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Jane Pillinger:

I think one of our main conclusions is that really remarkable things happen when women stand in their own power and the power of women's voices in leading to quite significant, in this case, significant institutional change. I mean, this is a change in global governance. It will lead to changes in national laws. It's allowing issues of gender-based violence and harassment to, I'm saying allowing. It's really opening the door for negotiations on gender-based violence and harassment in collective bargaining agreements and indeed also in global framework agreements which are negotiated between the global unions and multinational companies.

Robin Runge:

I think the other lesson that is told in the book, and we really want to lift up, is that only through collective action with freedom of association and collective bargaining is it really possible to truly prevent and eradicate gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work. And this is reflected in the document itself. It clearly states and upholds those labor standards and those critical rights, the freedom to associate and the freedom to collectively bargain. Any woman who's ever been sexually harassed knows this is true.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

Women workers and their unions taking the lead. What a powerful combination. We'll now feature Brenda Modise, one of our earliest guests and one of the many activists in the campaign and gender-based violence at work. Brenda, who is a social justice officer at FEDUSA, a union of domestic workers in South Africa, talks about the changes that are happening in her home country. Because of the efforts of Brenda and the union activists in South Africa, it's now one of the 20 countries that have ratified C190 so far.

During this year's 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence in honor of Giving Tuesday by donating \$100 to the Solidarity Center, you can support our work in ending gender-based violence and harassment and get a copy of the book, *Stopping Gender-Based Violence and Harassment at Work*. Go to our website, solidaritycenter.org, and click on the donate button.

Next, Brenda Modise, one of the many activists in the campaign to end gender-based violence and harassment at work, talks about how C190 will help create a violence free workplace. We'll begin with the joy the coalition realized on the council floor right after C190 was passed.

Brenda Modise:

We are, yes we are, yeah, we are ready for the convention. We are ready for convention. Yeah. That's the song. Yes, that's the song.

And even when he announced the lockdown now with the second wave, he also mentioned that they are eager and willing to ratify 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 him to ratify the Convention and make our job very, a bit easy for us to take the process of GBV forward.

Shawna Bader-Blau:

I remember in Geneva that the block 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.

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And I remember also the labor movement was of course the most joyous and absolutely broke out in song.

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.

Convention 190, it is one of the tools that will assist us in terms of making sure the world of work are protected. And it'll also assist countries with tools to be able to deal with gender-based violence. If the convention is implemented very well by countries, it'll 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. But with this convention, we're trying to address violence that is geared toward workers. It doesn't matter whether you are a man, a woman, old, young, LGBTQ community or to 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.

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.

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 their Employment Equity Act to include what the Convention 190 seeks to address.

But the convention only gives a framework in terms of how as the trade unions and workers and businesses should regulate that space. But 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.

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.

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 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 it respective of men or women, young or old.

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Shawna Bader-Blau:

The campaign to end gender-based violence and harassment at work demonstrates in no uncertain terms the power of workers and collective action. Together, through their unions, women workers from diverse jobs at a variety of workplaces around the world led the way for this momentous change. Their success highlights how essential the freedom to form unions is to ensuring safe workplaces and the ability to exercise basic rights. All workers deserve decent work and that includes gender equality and safe workplaces. Building power together, women workers achieved what some said was not possible, a global commitment to realize their goal.

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 they work to ensure a righteous future for workers fighting for dignity, freedom, equality, and justice. For The Solidarity Center Podcast, I'm Shawna Bader-Blau. Thanks for listening.