

Inter-Americas Women's Meeting Report

Mexico, April 22, 2015

The women's meeting was attended by 59 participants from 19 countries, among who were the members of IAMREC and the president of the World Women's Committee - WOC, Junéia Batista. The meeting discussed four important points: Violence against women, collective bargaining, PSI's work within the UN Commission on the Status of Women and an overview on gender and equity policies.

i- Campaign against gender violence

Global Work Report

Sandra Vermuyten, PSI Equality and Rights Officer, reported on the global work carried out by PSI on this subject. Violence against women exists in all countries and in all societies. It happens in public and private places, both in physical spaces and in virtual spaces online. Violence is often rooted in a deep-seated belief in the devaluation of women or that a woman is not equal to a man.

Stopping violence against women and girls is a major challenge to global public health, gender equality and human rights; it is a challenge for all countries of the world and for all types of societies. Studies held by UN Women and other agencies show that physical or sexual violence is a public health problem that affects more than a third of all women worldwide.

In addition, ILO and UN Women have expressed concern over the severity of the evolution of this scourge, calling on governments to put an end, through various mechanisms, to violence against women, focusing on workplace violence and urging government agencies to act more decisively to tackle this problem. For the year 2016, ILO is planning an agreement that compels participant countries to design and implement public policies to stop workplace violence and, more specifically, gender violence.

PSI and its affiliates have taken up this challenge and worked together with civil society to break the silence and mobilize against discrimination and violence, both in the workplace and in all areas of society. No matter where violence is produced or the form it takes, it affects the ability of women to exercise their rights and live a dignified and free life.

PSI, in addition to being part of the group of trade unions organizations at global level, has decided to act collectively to eradicate gender violence at work and, therefore, is promoting in all countries, through its affiliates, all kinds of actions, programs and campaigns aimed at exposing the problem, dimensioning it, and raising tripartite proposals for its eradication.

During World Congress 2012 PSI launched a major campaign to eliminate violence against women and domestic violence. Each PSI region led pilot projects and alliances with other civil society organizations and took decisive actions to eradicate this violence. A radical change in this area requires a multi-sectoral approach and affiliates in the Americas can play a key role in the process.

For years, affiliates in the Americas have been accumulating different experiences related to violence against women. They joined social movements fighting against discrimination and sexism and denounced the machismo entrenched in our society, especially in the labour market, where women workers suffer abuse, sexual harassment and, in many cases, are exposed to rape and even death.

This is why, in the past IAMREMUJ and IAMREC held in the US and in Guatemala, an agreement was sealed to intensify this union task, promoting greater coordination among all countries to generate a single strategy that would advance the Eradication of Violence Against Women in the workplace and in public employment, which was ratified at the WOC meeting in Geneva, 2014, following PSI's guidelines on gender policies.

Later that year, in Chile, around 150 PSI women representatives, coming from all continents, gathered at the international meeting on the Elimination of Violence Against Women in the Workplace and in Public Employment, held in Santiago, on October 9 and 10, including the President of the Republic of Chile, Michelle Bachelet. After two days of meetings, debates and exchange of experiences, a common strategy took shape and 10 action points were defined, and each one of the women's committees became responsible for them:

- To develop a capacity training plan for 2015 concerning Violence in the Workplace by sub-region, aiming at the exchange of experiences carried out in each country that could be replicated elsewhere.

- To generate a series of experiences and best practices in different countries and different services that could be shared by affiliates and pursued in their countries.
- To campaign for the ratification of international conventions against discrimination and in favor of women in countries where it still hasn't been done.
- To gather information, research, studies and country statistics on violence in the workplace, allowing the dimensioning and exposing of the problem at national, continental and global levels.
- To work with affiliates across the world, so that in 2016, a convention against violence in the workplace, with an emphasis on gender, is generated by ILO.
- PSI must urge and push its unions and its affiliates in particular, to develop policies and strategies to address sexual harassment.
- To create tools to guide the discussion, within unions, on violence in general teaching them to identify harassment and showing the ways to help, protect and defend the victims.
- To improve information on violence in the workplace on PSI's virtual and digital media.
- Preparation of an e-learning course on this issue to be made available on PSI's website.

Together with ILO and ITUC, we fought for the adoption of a new International Labour Convention against gender violence at work at the 322nd session of the ILO Governing Body (November 2014), when we requested the support our affiliates to develop an important role in lobbying for the inclusion in the proposal of an item on the development of a labour standard on domestic violence in the agenda of a future International Labour Conference. Finally, the Governing Council decided to postpone the discussion of this item until its 323rd session, which was held from October 29 to November 12, 2015.

In this session, the Board will face several priorities that compete for attention, so it is now more important than ever that trade unions in general, and the ILO Workers' Group in particular, redouble our efforts to emphasize the importance of this proposal.

Panel: Gender violence in the workplace

This panel aimed to share the best practices to combat violence against women in the workplace within PSI's work. It was moderated by Jillian Bartlett NUGFW TT and was attended by Mirtha Arias-APE, Paraguay, Cristina Sandoval de Chile and Lourdes Zea-STUNAM, Mexico.

The Paraguayan experience presented initiatives developed in the municipal sector that were based on the observation of the workplace from a gender perspective and had, as its main actions, the valuing of women's participation in traditionally male jobs within the sector, working on a proposal that defends pay equity, the increase in the number of women in management positions, both in unions and institutions and has moved forward, specifically in what concerns the union support rendered to women in the workplace, which led to the implementation of mechanisms for reporting workplace violence against women.

On the other hand, the Mexican experience focused on the education sector, where there has been an interesting reflection on the progress made on legislation and national institutions that promote gender equality and equity. A debate was undertaken on the concepts that generate violence, from a multidimensional analysis focusing both the law as well as the cultural production of stereotypes and forms of labour and sexual harassment. It was found that, in the education sector, 44% of women have been victims of violence, and the collective agreement has made progress in terms of clauses.

In Chile, a campaign against labour abuses was developed and it focused on collecting situations of abuse and/or harassment that exist in public services in Chile and organize an exhibition with this material. It was particularly successful in the health sector, and showed that the high percentage of women in health services causes them to be the most affected (70%) by this problem. The campaign involved the installation of a mailbox in services units, for workers to anonymously deliver testimonies, complaints and proposals on themes like abuse and harassment. This work arrived at the end of its first part with the development of a Guide on Labour Abuse Prevention and was launched in October 2014, with the presence of the President Michelle Bachelet and women representatives of the Inter-American region, of Europe and Africa.

Follow up points:

Finally, at this point, Inter-Americas women arrived to the conclusion that violence in the workplace can be addressed by unions through collective bargaining, assistance to victims, improvement of working conditions for women and the creation of an environment of respect and cooperation, rather than conflict and discrimination. This, of course, includes the fight for pay equity, the development of strong alliances with the women's movement, promotion of sisterhood as a way to depatriarchalize power, and development of the widest exchange of experiences possible between unions and women. PSI's action plan for the elimination of violence against women in the workplace proposed by the public services sector and developed after the regional meeting in Santiago, Chile, was approved considering the different proposals coming from sub-regions; the need to support the new ILO Convention as a national and international strategy was shared.

ii- Labour rights and gender

The attack on labour and trade union rights in the public sector not only remains far from ending but is also increasing in many countries. However, there are places where collective bargaining processes have emerged and consolidated, presenting a model of social dialogue and labour agreement where gender equality policies have potential and count on a support structure.

Panel: Collective bargaining focused on gender

The aim was to share experiences where gender equality and equity were accomplished through collective bargaining processes. The panel had a greater focus on the public administration sector. Maritza Spinal of FESITUN, Nicaragua, was the moderator and received contributions from Patricia Lozano of UTRADEC, Colombia, Maria Carolina Mauad of UPCN, Argentina, and Lisa Oaks of AFT, United States.

The Argentinian experience occurs in the context of a strong culture and practice of collective bargaining in the public sector that has parity structure as a fundamental element. Therefore, in order to advance, it is critical that a better understanding of the specific situation of men and women is achieved, which is given during the negotiation process and considering the need to propose provisions that address the issue. However, this is not an easy work, as it requires high training and women's participation to prevent that the same patterns that reproduce gender violence and perpetuate stereotypes, both in terms of labour development and work environment, are repeated. These initiatives can only advance with sustainable and bottom-up processes. Each new achievement represents one more step on the way to the top of the pyramid.

In the US, the work in the education sector started with the recognition that workplaces are dangerous to all workers, men and women. Kansas AFT adopted a resolution to end harassment, which is the most common form of violence in the workplace. They started by researching on the incidence of this type of violence, which led them to develop a policy on job security in the workplace counting on a complaint reporting process and access to testimonies in face of the acknowledgement of the problem, which until then had not been considered as such. The context experienced in this state of the US, is an attack on collective bargaining rights, a key instrument to achieve progress. This is why the struggle is concentrated in the defense of these fundamental rights in order to achieve other rights.

Colombia had ratified ILO Conventions 151 and 154. However, no regulation concerning the effective exercise of the right to collective bargaining was put in practice. So, in the last years, we proceeded to the regulation and negotiation that resulted in an initial agreement at national level, in the public sector. The statement signed by union counterparts, the Centrales Obreras, the Public Sector Federations, and PSI, includes in the equality themes, the need to issue a regulatory decree for the following sectors: women, afro-descendants,

indigenous and LGBTI in public administration. Also on sexual harassment in the workplace, there are the maternal and parental leaves, benefits for men and women workers with family responsibilities and pay equity.

Follow Up Points

As a conclusion of this moment, Inter-Americas women found that real changes have occurred through a gender perspective in collective bargaining; however, greater inclusion of women in the negotiation process is necessary. There was a strong call to defend the rights of collective bargaining in the public sector once there have been serious setbacks. Harder work on the development of negotiation terms, as well as the promotion of best practices exchange must be sought. Similarly, they stated that gender mainstreaming must be fully present in PSI's sector work, which should reflect in the results of sectoral meetings and cross-cutting issues. This year, the World Women's Committee - WOC, in late May, will discuss gender strategies for each sector, to ensure a gender perspective in the PSI's Sectoral work. In order to move ahead we must intensify campaigns and research, and ensure that gender work is sustainable.

iii. Economic empowerment and UN Commission on the Status of Women

Report on PSI's work in the UNCSW

Junéia Batista, president of the World Women's Committee-WOC, reported that PSI has been participating in the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW) for years. The union delegation at this instance is growing every year, as well as the interest shown by PSI affiliates in participating in it. The central issue in the UNCSW was the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, after 20 years of its adoption. Instead of accommodating further discussions as a way of advancing gender equality policies during the UNCSW, UN Women chose to conduct a closed negotiation during the month prior to the meeting, denying civil society the opportunity of offering its inputs.

The final document, a declaration adopted on the first day of the UNCSW, was seen as weak and not very innovative. Another issue of concern was the involvement with the private sector, taken as the main engine for gender equality, while decent work, living wages, social protection and public services were left out of the equation in the political debates organized during official sessions. The corollary was the final announcement on the cooperation agreement between UN Women and Uber to create one million jobs by 2020. We could not understand how one million precarious and informal jobs could contribute to the economic empowerment of women. Obviously, this means the exact opposite of what we have been fighting for in the last decades. Uber, the company, represents the most aggressive informalization example of an industry, which has already been deregulated three decades ago.

The next day, PSI, other global unions and civil society, expressed their deep concern about the announced agreement between UN Women and Uber and requested this cooperation to be terminated. A joint statement circulated among affiliates and allies in civil society and three days after the agreement with Uber was announced, UN Women withdrew from it. Mass media covered the issue with clear references to PSI. This short but intense campaign, opened an opportunity for unions to take leadership and be visible among its allies in civil society, in the context of UNCSW.

In addition, it publicized the danger posed by agreements that only benefit the private sector and strengthened the criticism that had already been directed to the policy priorities set by UN Women. On March 18, 2015, a high level meeting was organized to discuss these issues with UN Women's leadership, which resulted in 13 action points for the future involvement between UN Women, global unions and civil society.

Follow up points

This is expected to be a new beginning in terms of our participation as PSI at UN Women and a greater involvement is also expected from trade unions in the debate about the economic empowerment of women for the coming months and in the next UNCSW meeting, in 2016.

iv. Overview on PSI Americas' gender equality and equity policy

According to each of the sub-regions, namely the Andean, Central America, Caribbean, Southern Cone, Brazil, Canada and the US, making progress is important, even at a slow pace. It is necessary to look at more sustainable processes that empower women and make them more influential, both at union and PSI levels. We need more and better actions in order to consolidate our progress and the actual direction to be followed by women within PSI and its affiliates.

We must recognize that together we can transform power relationships that are able to force unions to build equality spaces for men and women. We were the first global union to adopt a gender and equity policy. 13 years have passed since that moment.

Follow up points:

This agenda item should have counted on more time for discussion, due to the complexity required to evaluate the process as a whole. More and deeper discussion will be needed in the future, as well as raising information about PSI affiliated unions' gender profiles, which will allow us to reach clearer conclusions.

Finally, the women's meeting called for a full day meeting to be dedicated to this issue in the future, and not just half-day.