

NATIONAL WORKSHOP FOR UNIONISTS IN INFORMAL SECTOR

“Trade Union Development Strategies for Women”

INTRODUCTION

This Workshop for women union activists was conducted, by the **Ambekar Institute for Labour Studies [AILS] with active participation of FES/ILO and UNITES on 11th & 12th August, 2006 at Bangalore.**

There was a demanded regular awareness programs on issues such as legislation for women, ways of employment generation, government schemes and credit assistance available, etc. They also wanted information on social issues e.g health, domestic violence, that concerned women. Regular training programs were essential for women unionists at local centers, so that more activists could be trained for active union work. At the end of the program women will be ready to conduct programs at their own centers with resource inputs from FES/ILO and UNITES. In this they wished for guidance in terms of research inputs, accounting, program formulation, etc.

The present Workshop attempts to cover a wide range of issues that concern women and women in the informal sector in particular. The emphasis on informal sector is based on the fact that 93 percent of the workforce is in this sector, in which women form the majority. If these women are to be empowered, they need assistance by way of decent employment, social security, welfare benefits and financial assistance in times of need. What is the trade union role in helping them achieve these goals for themselves? Are they well-equipped to play an effective role as responsible stakeholders in uplifting the poorest, most vulnerable sections of the working class? It is hoped that the issues discussed in this workshop may serve as a guide to planning a better future for women trade union organizers.

Women in India-A Fact sheet

Social Indicator	India	World	Developing World	Sri Lanka
Infant Mortality Rate, per 1000 live births	73	60	66	17
Maternal Mortality Rate, per 100,000 live births	570	430	470	140
Female Literacy, %	58	77.6	70.4	90.2
Female School Enrollment	47	62	57	67
Earned Income by females, %	26	58.0	53.0	35.5
Underweight Children, %	53	30	30	38
Total Fertility Rate	3.2	2.9	3.2	2.1
Women in Government, %	6	7	5	9
Contraception usage, %	44	56	54	66
Low birth weight babies, %	33	17	7	25

Sri Lanka is added for comparison as having made exceptional efforts in the field of female education.

The above statistics indicate the basic parameters relating to the quality of life of women in India, vis a vis that of the world as a whole, developing world, and that of Sri Lanka-and not in comparison with that of men. The objective is to indicate the difference better educational opportunities alone can make, to the quality of women's lives.

As women receive greater education and training, they will earn more money. As women earn more money-as has been repeatedly shown-they spend it in the further education and health of their children, as opposed to men, who often spend it on drink, tobacco or other women. As women rise in economic status, they will gain greater social standing in the household the villages, cities, and will have greater voice. As women gain influence and consciousness, they will make stronger claims to their entitlements - gaining further training, better access to credit and higher incomes - and command attention of police and courts when attacked. As women's economic power grows, it will be easier to overcome the tradition of "son preference" and thus put an end to the evil of dowry.

How can women in trade unions achieve these goals for their women members? Is it their job, it may be asked? Before we go on to give the usual arguments of dual responsibility and the difficulty for women in participating in union activities, etc., let us see the snapshot of a new revolution that is quietly transforming these age-old arguments on women's capabilities, though in a different field of political empowerment.

STRATEGIES FOR ORGANISING WOMEN WORKERS IN INFORMAL SECTOR

Thus, it is obvious that it is impossible for trade unions to ignore the task of serious organizing in the informal sector, as the vast majority of the world's workers, including the poorest - who most need self-defense through organization - are in the informal sector. Whatever may be the causes and reasons behind the growth of the informal sector, it is now an integral part of global production and marketing chains. What is particular to the informal sector is the absence of rights and social protection of the workers involved in it; in every other respect, and particularly from the economic point of view, the formal and informal sectors form an integral whole.

The traditional concept of a worker, reflected in the legislation of many countries, is based on a direct employee/employer relationship. As this relationship is being replaced by a variety of more diffused and indirect - but nonetheless dependent - relationships in the process of production, trade union organizing can no longer focus primarily on the employment relationship but should focus instead on the worker and on his/her needs for protection and representation.

A majority of workers expelled from the formal sector by the global economic crisis are women. Even before the crisis, however, women constituted most of the informal labour force (child labour is also strongly represented). The very great majority of home workers are women (and home work represents as much as 40 to 50% of labour in certain key export sectors, such as garments and footwear); women are also the great majority of street vendors in informal markets. It is worth noting here that also 90% of EPZ labours are women and that in the majority of cases workers' rights and social protection are non-existent also in EPZs. What they have in common with informal sector workers is that they are in both cases unprotected, largely unorganized,

female labour. Another phenomenon that has gained prominence in recent years in India is that of the BPO/Call centers, where women work in large numbers as well.

Internal Program

A successful organizing strategy therefore requires securing recognition and representation at the different levels required, in the first place for the organizations that already exist. The trade union movement is in the best position to help informal sector workers secure such recognition and representation. The first step would be to make a start in the movement itself and in the institutions where it is represented.

At the present time, informal sector workers are generally not represented in the institutions and organizations of the labour movement. Even though individual trade unions do organize informal sector workers in an number of cases, national trade union federations make no provision for their representation within their structures. The same is true for the international trade union federations. Within the ILO structures informal sector workers are not represented.

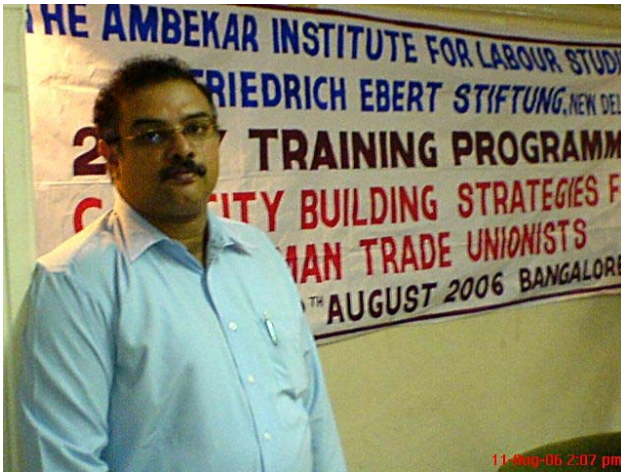
4. The union can create its own funds for running its own program for the benefit of its members, such as:

- i. Running vocational training institutes
- ii. Dispensary for members
- iii. Micro-credit Activities
- iv. Employment generation activities e.g maintenance work contracts can be acquired by the union, and given to workers, in order to provide employment for displaced workers.

Along with the regular cadre-building activities, the informal sector organization/union should establish co-operation/networking with national trade union centers, and should examine ways in which appropriate forms of representation of informal sector workers can be introduced in their structures, as well as ways in which formal cooperation with existing informal sector and formal sector organizations can be established. A working party could also be formed for that purpose, with a clear mandate to bring the organizations in, not to keep them out. This strategy would be of advantage to both the national centers as well as to the group-specific union.

In conclusion, it can be stated that informal sector workers are already organizing, partly in existing union structures originating in the formal sector, partly into new unions created by themselves, partly into associations which are sometimes described as NGOs but which are often in fact proto-unions. International networks of informal sector workers already exist. The experience, activities and organizational structures created in this way are valuable resources and points of leverage for the entire trade union movement, also at international level. They are either already a part of the trade union movement, or they are its closest partners and allies. Therefore, any discussion and planning on organizing the informal sector should include as a matter of course those who are already doing the job. The stabilization of what remains of the trade union movement in the formal sector now depends on the organization of the informal sector. Only by organizing the informal sector can the trade union movement maintain the critical mass in terms of membership and representation it needs, to be a credible social and political force.

At the venue



Active Learning



Presentation



Group work in progress

