

*Women workers:
Reaching for the sky*

Trade Unions & The Beijing Platform for Action

International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU)

Ed. du Roi Albert II, 5, bte 1 - B - 1210 Brussels

Tel: 32 2 224.02.11 Telefax: 32 2 201.58.15

E-mail: internetpo@icftu.org

WEB Site: <http://www.icftu.org>

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May 2000

Report written by Kate Holman

FOREWORD: SETTING THE CONTEXT

The Platform for Action (PFA) agreed by governments at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 was acclaimed as “an agenda for women’s empowerment”. Referring to the commitments contained in the 12 critical areas of the PFA, the then UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali declared: “Now the momentum of Beijing must be translated into concrete action. We must all ensure that the decisions reached in Beijing will change the world.”

The ICFTU and its affiliates have endorsed the Beijing Declaration and the PFA, and have committed themselves, since the Fourth World Conference, to work to put the Beijing objectives into practice. The more so as they had lobbied hard to improve the draft texts, notably Section F on women and the economy which contained issues of major concern to trade unions.

In the five years since 1995, have women been empowered, and has the world been changed? Or have governments failed to live up to the commitments they made in a range of areas from education to the economy, from human rights to health?

At the ICFTU’s Seventh World Women’s Conference in Rio de Janeiro in May 1999, which brought together 300 participants from 101 affiliated national trade union centres, delegates considered how the international trade union movement should prepare for the UN General Assembly Special Session on Beijing+5 (New York, 5-9 June 2000) and the Special Session on Copenhagen+5 (Geneva, 26-30 June 2000). They reiterated their total support for the Beijing Declaration and its implementation. They urged governments to respect the commitments made in Beijing, on the issues of women and peace, at a local, regional, national, and global level. They also called for the trade union agenda to be discussed at preparatory meetings, for women trade unionists to be included in country’s delegations to the special session, and for the ICFTU to hold a meeting during the session and set up a working group to evaluate the Beijing conference follow-up. They also requested that, in addition to the 1998-99 ILO/ICFTU study on women workers and unions, a survey should be carried out to assess what unions themselves have done to implement the Platform for Action. The responses to that demand are included in this report. But it also goes wider, to draw on a range of reports and studies carried out by the ICFTU itself over the last five years, as well as evidence from women’s organisations and NGOs, to analyse not only action by the trade union movement, but to weigh up what governments have, and have not done to live up to their Beijing commitments.

INTRODUCTION

In March this year, the Chairperson of the Preparatory Committee for the Beijing+5 special session, Rose Odera of Kenya acknowledged that no country had fully implemented the pledges made in the 1995 Platform for Action. Five years was a short period for governments to put their development plans into effect, she added, although the review process would still fulfil a useful purpose.

But over the last year, trade unions, NGOs and the women's movement have been scrutinising governments' activities to assess whether a lack of time - or rather a lack of political will - has been responsible for the failure to live up to commitments.

In the intervening five years, events have not stood still. Globalisation has continued apace, supposedly with the aim of creating a worldwide market which would allow for a fairer distribution of resources. But the fact is that the process of economic globalisation has largely gone off the rails. The promises of solidarity have given way to a race for competitive advantage and profits. Increased competition has put pressure on companies to cut costs and restructure their operations. Economic crisis has gripped large areas of the world. New technology has continued to transform the workplace. The demand for an increasingly flexible workforce has eroded job security and employment benefits. Many of these developments have had a particularly damaging effect on women, both at work and in society, but governments - as well as the international bodies with power to regulate the world market - have failed to take steps to alleviate their impact.

"The financial crisis has revealed the short-comings of the headlong pursuit of economic development at the expense of broadly-based social development targeted to reducing poverty," stated the ICFTU in response to a recent annual report by the World Trade Organisation.

In the run-up to the special sessions on Beijing+5 and Copenhagen + 5 , trade unions have been working in cooperation with women's NGOs to bring about a change in governments' political agenda - to put social development, and the central role of women in such development - at the top of their list of priorities.

THE NEW ECONOMIC REALITY

The country reports detailed below describe many changes made within trade unions to empower women. They also list a number of legislative innovations in the wake of Beijing. However, several trade union centres - among them Bermuda, Guinée and India - hold the view that despite these changes, the conditions of women's lives and their general status in society have remained static or, in some respects, worsened.

Among the specific factors singled out are an increase in violence against women, growth in the poverty gap between rich and poor, and growing levels of exploitation in the workplace.

Globalisation poses a huge challenge for the trade union movement, in that it increases the exploitation of workers – particularly women. Throughout the world, more and more women are joining the jobs market. Yet despite all the efforts which have been made, women generally earn less than men. The ICFTU has highlighted other disturbing developments. Since the 1970s, with the restructuring of the global economy, the ‘informal sector’ has continued to expand worldwide, forcing thousands of women into hard and often hazardous labour with no social protection. Women also make up a growing proportion of migrant workers - many of them vulnerable and exploited. Women with disabilities form another group which has lost out in the scramble for global markets and increased profits.

Some developing countries have sought to increase their competitiveness by setting up export processing zones, or *maquiladoras* as they are called in Latin America. In the Philippines, young women make up 90% of the workforce in the 100 or more zones scattered around the country. “The *maquiladoras* are the worst example of the violation of women workers’ rights in Latin America,” says ICFTU Women’s Committee chair Nancy Riche.

Over the last five years, the volatility of world markets has brought economic disaster for some regions. “Statistics and eye witness reports from Asia show that once again it is women who are paying the price of the crisis,” reported the ICFTU in 1999. While in the transition economies of Central and Eastern Europe, research has confirmed that women are the chief victims of change.

Some of these issues are examined in more detail below. The Beijing Platform for Action may have been an agenda for changing the world, but concrete action is still needed if it is not to be - in the words of Indian trade unionists - “reduced to yet another piece of paper”.

THE TRADE UNION RESPONSE

“While urging governments to honour their commitments, namely those made at Beijing’s World Women’s Conference, and campaigning against irresponsible employers, we, the trade unions, should be equally determined to ensure that women have their say in our decision-making.”

Bill Jordan, ICFTU General Secretary

The Beijing Platform for Action called specifically on trade unions to take action in a number of areas:

- Education and training of women
- Women and health
- Violence against women
- Women and the economy
- Women in power and decision-making
- Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women
- Human rights of women
- The girl child

In early 2000, ICFTU affiliates around the world reported on the activities they had carried out to implement the Beijing plan. They were asked about their participation in formulating National Action Plans, about changes in their own policies and structures, improvements in the status of women in their country, and their relationship with NGOs. Information was received from trade union centres in Argentina, Bermuda, Brazil, Ceylon, Democratic Republic of Congo, Côte d'Ivoire, Finland, France, Guinée, Hong Kong, Hungary, India, Italy, Japan, Korea, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mali, Mongolia, Netherlands, Niger, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Singapore, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, USA, and Zimbabwe.

Argentina

Thanks to positive action by the Confederación General del Trabajo de la República Argentina (CGTA), all affiliated unions have now set up women's departments or sections. The number of women on decision-making bodies has also increased.

Since Beijing, campaigns have been organised on violence against women, recruitment, discrimination and sexual harassment at work. Aside from the 'normal' trade union issues of equal opportunities and treatment at work, women in the economy, gender and trade, etc, unions have taken up concerns such as women and sustainable development and women and AIDS, reaching women through conferences and workshops.

Bermuda

The Bermuda Industrial Union says women have been encouraged to take an active role in the movement, and are doing so. But nationally the gap between the 'haves' and 'have nots' in society is growing. The union has demanded wage increases linked to the growing cost of basic consumer items, but employers' insistence on percentage rather than across-the-board raises keeps the low paid trapped in poverty.

Brazil

In 1997 an amendment to the Brazilian Constitution was passed to provide 30% reserved seats for women in decision-making bodies at all levels. A similar 'quota' was adopted in 1992 by the ICFTU for women's participation in all union activities and bodies. These two provisions have spurred the three ICFTU affiliates, the

Confederação Geral dos Trabalhadores (CGT), Central Unica de Trabalhadores (CUT) and the Forca Sindical (FS) to take effective measures to implement the quota in their own structures, and integrate a gender perspective into all their policies and programmes.

The unions are part of a working group, set up by the Brazilian Ministry of Employment, to implement measures to combat racial and sexual discrimination at work. They have taken action to raise women's awareness about issues of health and safety, and to encourage them to take part in enterprise committees to prevent accidents in the workplace, especially focusing on pregnant and nursing mothers.

- **Changes in the status of women:** since Beijing, reforms include 12 days' maternity leave, paternity leave, right to own land and obtain credit, free education and maternity protection. The Sao Paulo region has signed a legal convention banning all forms of discrimination.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** the three confederations work together with NGOs to create strategic alliances, to mobilise women, and to organise seminars, with positive results.

Sri Lanka

The Ceylon Workers' Congress (CWC) has made representations to the government and has campaigned to promote equal pay for work of equal value and improve the economic and cultural status of women. The CWC has restructured its Women's Department, and elected a woman to its decision-making executive. Female coordinators work in the regions, and educational programmes for both women and men are designed to promote gender awareness.

Democratic Republic of Congo

The Confédération Démocratique du Travail (CDT) women's department set up a reflection group to prepare a programme for action, in which each affiliated union should be involved. In 1999 it carried out, for the first time, an inquiry into sexual harassment at work, from which a preliminary report has been produced. The CDT also resolved to include a woman at each level of union structure, from the workplace up to the executive.

The CDT has worked with NGOs in an annual campaign to combat violence against women. It has found a lack of awareness about trade unionism among NGOs, but the campaign has raised the unions' public profile on the issue of violence, which is often surrounded by taboos, with few women understanding their rights.

Côte d'Ivoire

The Union Générale des Travailleurs de Côte d'Ivoire (UGTCI) has organised a round-table debate with the Minister responsible for women's issues, drawn up a White Paper, with United Nations support, and joined the group of NGOs and trade unions established in the wake of the Beijing conference. It has amended its structure to ensure that 40% of executive committee members are women: at present, 17 of the 50 members are female. It is creating women's committees at grass-roots levels of the organisation. The UGTCI has taken part in a radio broadcast to inform the public about the Platform for Action, and regional union leaders have organised awareness-raising campaigns among women.

Nationally, a new law banning genital mutilation of girls has been adopted. Jobs formerly reserved for men, such as in the diplomatic, police and fire services, are now opening up to women.

Finland

Suomen Ammattiliittojen Keskusjärjestö (SAK) and the other social partners have set up working groups to lead five projects on equality in income policy. They focus on:

- job evaluation;
- development of tools and criteria for evaluating equality in workplaces;
- reconciliation of work and family life;
- research on pay differentials;
- a round table on equality issues.

Within the movement, SAK has focused on monitoring its women members, and organising education on gender issues for both men and women. It has taken part in two projects supported by the European Union's NOW programme, on getting long-term unemployed women back to work, and gender segregation in the jobs market.

France

The Confédération Française Démocratique du Travail (CFDT) has taken steps to achieve a better balance of women in positions of responsibility in the workplace. Training on gender issues has been organised around union sections within enterprises and a debate initiated throughout the confederation. It has also carried out a survey of women members to find out how they feel about their working lives. The CFDT has adopted the approach of 'mainstreaming' women's interests throughout its policies.

In France, the unions have taken active part in the public debate leading up to a new law on equality in political life.

Guinée

Education, training and awareness-raising continue to be priorities for the Union Syndicale des Travailleurs de Guinée (USTG). The USTG's efforts to unionise more women, especially in the informal sector, has led it to concentrate on the interests of this large section of the population.

Since 1995, more women have taken up positions at all levels of the union, including in decision-making, with a number of female secretaries-general found in affiliated unions.

The USTG is not the only centre to note a decline, rather than an improvement, in women's status in society generally, despite trade unions' efforts to counter this trend.

Hong Kong

This year, the Hong Kong Confederation of Trade Unions (HKCTU) has amended its constitution to provide for one member of the executive committee to be elected from the Women's Committee. Its main strategy is to strengthen women's participation at all levels through education, as well as constitutional changes.

Hungary

The Women's Board of the National Confederation of Hungarian Trade Unions (MSZOSZ) - set up in 1990 - has kept members informed about the objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action. The confederation is in the process of developing its links with NGOs.

India

Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) is part of the National Core Group to review the BPFA, made up of NGOs and women's groups from all over the country. It has worked to ensure that labour issues are adequately reflected in the group's report, and in the response to all the critical areas. Last year, the first-ever Charter of Demands for women workers was drawn up, demanding the government's commitment to the Platform for Action.

- **Women and health:** whereas the right to maternity leave was won some time ago, little attention is paid in collective bargaining to women's health outside reproduction. HMS wants safer working conditions, as well as research into this issue.
- **Violence against women:** HMS has stressed this issue within the core group. It launched a campaign - together with women's groups - for safer train travel, centred on stations in Delhi, Bilaspur, Kota and Vishakhapatnam.
- **Women and the economy:** HMS is campaigning for better equal pay legislation, and has pressed for new national legislation in line with International Labour Organisation (ILO) Convention 156 on workers with family responsibilities. HMS has been active in areas where only women are employed, supporting the Anganwadi

workers in their fight for better pay and conditions. These are young women trained by the government to work mainly with children, often for long hours and on minimal wages.

- **The girl child:** HMS took an active role, with women's groups, in the protest campaign following a high-profile case of child sexual abuse within the family, at Chitrakoot, in September 1999. It is calling for a law to recognise sexual abuse within the family as a crime.
- **Status of women:** Since the Supreme Court issued mandatory guidelines against sexual harassment in the workplace, in August 1997, HMS has given the document a wide distribution and held national and regional workshops and debates.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** Collaboration in campaigns such as those described above has been a mutually beneficial learning experience. Networking has saved time and energy, by avoiding duplicated effort, and allowed for more issues to be taken up.

Italy

The Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL) has organised meetings, distributed information, and focused training on violence against women and equal pay. The department for equal opportunities has sought to apply the principles of mainstreaming and empowerment.

A national ministry, established by government decree, is now responsible for promoting equal opportunities.

Japan

The Japanese Trade Union Confederation RENGO has participated in the government's Council on Equal Participation for Men and Women. The Women's Group with which RENGO collaborates took part in a follow-up convention in Japan in November 1995. RENGO submitted in 1998 demands to the Prime Minister, following a rally to mark the 50th anniversary of the Declaration of Human Rights.

It has publicised the BPPA among affiliates, and campaigned to increase the number of female union officials.

In October 1999, RENGO's Women's Department became the Equality Department. The Committee to Promote Equality between Men and Women has an advisory role on the organisation's central executive.

RENGO's 6th biennial convention in 1999 passed a resolution on equal participation and preventing sexual harassment, and increased the number of women on the executive board, which now stands at 10%. RENGO's Women's Forum is held every year and gathers some 1,200 participants. Since 1998, RENGO has also been organising an annual national Forum on Equal Participation, attended by an equal number of women and men. Similar debates will be taking place, as from next year, at local and provincial levels.

- **Status of women:** RENGO campaigned for the Law on Equal Participation between Men and Women, which came into effect in 1999. In January 2001, a new government office for equal participation will come into being, under the direct control of the Prime Minister, with more power to coordinate women's issues.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** RENGO is a member of the International Women's Liaison Council, recognised by the UN.

Korea

The government drew up a National Plan of Action in October 1995, entitled Ten Policy Priorities for the Advancement of Korean Women, followed in December by the Women's Development Act. One of the most significant outcomes of Beijing has been the Gender Discrimination Prevention and Relief Act, passed in February 1999 and put into effect on 1 July. This aims to achieve women's equality in every sector of society by outlawing gender discrimination in employment, education, and the enforcement of laws. However, the Federation of Korean Trade Unions (FKTU) regrets that the involvement of unions and NGOs is limited and will seek to remedy this.

Latvia

The Free Trade Union Confederation (LBAS) has taken part in organising a women's network, translated and distributed conference documents among affiliated unions, participated in a two-year training project entitled "Beijing - in Life", and in the setting up of a national Cooperation Council of Women's Organisations.

LBAS has drawn up a draft Labour Code, laying special emphasis on equal pay, maternity and parental leave, working conditions for women and social security. The confederation has published a free booklet on *The Rights of Working Women* and, together with NGOs, has organised training seminars for women.

The LBAS has set up a National Women's Council, while women's committees have also been established in branch unions. The proportion of women trade unionists has increased, both generally and in decision-making, collective bargaining procedures have been improved, and gender awareness among union members raised.

Lithuania

The Programme for the Advancement of Women in Lithuania was adopted by the government in November 1996. The Law on Equal Opportunities was adopted on 1 December 1998.

The Women's Council of Lithuanian Trade Union Unification (LPSS), set up in 1998, is working to implement the action plan for 1997-2000, specifically in the areas of:

- improving women's social-economic situation;
- education of women;
- advancement of women's role in public life and governing structures.

It is also active in improving health care and safe working conditions for women, and promoting equal opportunities and equal pay at work.

The LPSS's twin strategy targets both education and lobbying of government to introduce social, economic and labour legislation for women.

- **Cooperation with NGOs:** the LPSS Women's Council works with various NGOs and is a member of the Women's Information Centre of Lithuania. Unions and NGOs work together to resolve urgent women's problems and exchange views and experience.

Luxembourg

The Confédération Générale de Travail (CGT) is a partner in the project launched by the Ministry for the Advancement of Women known as "Let's Share Equality". It has also taken part in policy discussions within the framework of the Committee for Women's Work: a quadripartite consultative group of the Ministry, also involving NGOs.

Since 1995, the CGT has helped to bring about a new law to combat sexual harassment, and improve maternity protection.

Malaysia

The Malaysian TUC was involved, with the National Council of Women's Organisations and the Department of Women's Affairs, in drawing up the national Women's Action Plan for presentation to the Malaysian parliament.

The MTUC Women's Section has been monitoring women at work and in unions, recruiting, training, and campaigning against sexual harassment, basing its strategies on the ICFTU's Charter on the rights of working women. It has intensified its campaign to bring more women into decision-making roles.

Since Beijing, the Women's Section has worked to get women workers' concerns reflected more widely in the media, and has prepared strategies for action on many of the PFA's 12 critical areas of concern, in particular women and poverty, education, health, the economy, human rights, media, and the environment.

- **Status of women:** since the MTUC-affiliated Public Sector Unions won the right to two months' maternity leave, this provision has been extended to all women workers.

Following a campaign by the MTUC Women's Committee and NGOs, and tripartite consultation, the Ministry of Labour launched the national Code of Practice on the Eradication and Prevention of Sexual Harassment in August 1999. A new law on violence against women was introduced in 1997. The number of women in the workforce is increasing rapidly, but there has been little improvement in legal provisions, and policies such as providing workplace childcare have not been implemented. Most women are still employed in low-skilled jobs, with very few in professional positions such as lawyers, doctors and

engineers. Culturally, women still face discrimination. Little progress has been made on the sharing of domestic responsibilities, and it is difficult for women to run their own businesses.

- **Cooperation with NGOs:** the MTUC Women's Section works with the National Council of Women's Organisations. Together, they have been effective in putting forward women's views to the government on issues such as health care for people on low incomes.

The MTUC concludes: *"It has taken too much time to implement the Plan of Action. Promotion of the Platform has not been done aggressively in the workplace and in society."*

Mali

The Women Workers' National Commission of the Union Nationale des Travailleurs du Mali took part in the general assembly following Beijing, and has drawn up strategies for applying the PFA. Since 1995, the UNTM has organised formal and informal education and training for women, focusing on the environment, health and safety at work, and the legal rights of women workers.

Awareness-raising campaigns have stressed the need for women to participate in trade union decision-making. And at its 1997 congress, the UNTM adopted a 30% quota of women in union positions.

- **Status of women:** a Family law is under discussion, and the rules on Commerce now permit women to trade without their husband's permission. The implementation of Ordinance 92-024 in 1995 created a framework for equality between male and female wage-earners. But despite new legislation and the ratification of various ILO Conventions, discrimination persists.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** the UNTM is a founding member of the Coordination of Women's Associations and NGOs of Mali. Such cooperation is important in creating a coalition which is beginning to empower women in Mali. The Coordination represents the strongest voice speaking on women's behalf to the government and development partners.

Mongolia

The Confederation of Mongolian Trade Unions (CMTU) has taken part in developing the national programme, and has adopted a new policy on women. The new policy centres on improving working women's rights through legislation and collective agreements, and upgrading social protection including maternity leave and benefits

The CMTU has also initiated a three-year project on gender issues and organised campaigns and training on women's employment, health and safety, women's rights, and the media. The CMTU Women's Committee has been reinforced..

Nationally, more women are taking part in economic and political life, and new laws on labour and the family have been introduced.

Netherlands

The Federatie Nederlandse Vakbeweging (FNV) took the initiative in setting up the Action Platform 2000: an umbrella group of 160 organisations which supplies information to the Dutch government, as well as monitoring its policies.

The FNV has been seeking to implement the PFA through:

- a campaign on women's human rights and equal pay;
- lobbying in favour of legislation giving all employees the right to work part-time, and enabling part-timers to add extra hours, to enable men and women to reconcile their work and home lives.

It has criticised the Dutch government for failing to react more positively to the Beijing commitments.

The FNV has worked with NGOs both inside and outside the Action Platform 2000, and helped to draw up an alternative report on five critical areas of the PFA.

Niger

The Union des Syndicats des Travailleurs (USTN) has taken part in all the meetings organised by the Ministry for Women on follow-up to the Platform for Action.

It has pressed for the ratification and application of UN and ILO Conventions. The USTN has led the government to set up a framework for collective bargaining, and a tripartite framework for social dialogue. It has also taken up the issues of women's health and health insurance, and violence against women.

All USTN affiliates have set up women's committees and have nominated at least two women onto their executive councils.

The USTN is working to increase women's solidarity through cooperation with NGOs, and this has already brought positive results, for instance in preparations for The World Women's March.

Norway

The Landsorganisasjonen I Norge (LO) has disseminated information about the Platform, monitored its own documentation to ensure conformity with the Beijing principles, and adopted an action plan on sexual harassment.

Immediately after Beijing, the LO launched a project, "Women in the Trade Union Movement", which brings together all the main strands of its policy on women, including:

- boosting women's participation and influence in trade unions;
- opposing sexual harassment;
- mainstreaming gender issues;

- analysing the role of men and encouraging fathers to take parental leave and a bigger part in family life.

LO has an equal rights department and equal rights committee, and similar committees have been set up in its 28 affiliated unions. Some of these affiliates have introduced a quota system for women on decision-making bodies.

Mainstreaming is the central strategy, and gender issues are integrated into all aspects of the LO's work. Women's participation has increased dramatically: they now make up 50% of the active membership, and five of the eight LO leaders are female.

- **Status of women:** maternity and parental leave has been increased. The Equality Status and Working Environment Acts are being revised. LO is lobbying for the former to apply also to the Church. Norwegian women's participation in the labour market is among the highest in the world.

The LO concludes: *“Although a lot has been achieved in terms of equal rights, much work is still remaining. Sexism is found in new and disguised variants. Equality does not only mean equal opportunities for men and women, it has also to do with fundamental values such as respect, equal status, understanding and identity.*

“LO's vision in its equal rights work is a society where both sexes have equal rights and duties, in working life, in society at large, and at home. Reducing daily/weekly working hours is an important instrument in this respect, as well as to work for a situation where women and men share domestic tasks and family responsibilities.”

Poland

Solidarnosc (NSZZ) has focused its efforts on training for women, changes in the labour code, and the campaign to reform the ILO Convention on Maternity Protection. It is developing its contacts with NGOs, and draws attention to the importance of the Internet as a source of information on women in the labour market, the economy, and society.

Portugal

The União Geral de Trabalhadores (UGT-P) has held meetings and seminars for male and female trade unionists on a range of issues including new forms of work organisation, social protection and women's rights.

As a member of the “Equality Observatory”, the UGT has applied the principle of mainstreaming to the analysis of collective agreements, with a view to raising awareness among negotiators on both sides, and encouraging innovative measures to promote equal opportunities.

It has helped to set up a special prize for companies who adopt positive action, entitled “Equality means Quality”.

The organisation has expressed its views on new legal proposals, such as reversing the burden of proof in sex discrimination cases, and the transposition into Portuguese law of European agreements on part-time work and parental leave.

At its last congress in 1996, the UGT amended its constitution to include clauses on equality for women in union decision-making, and opposing gender discrimination and sexual harassment. The last five years have seen a big increase in the proportion of women in decision-making positions.

- **Status of women:** Portugal has a high proportion of women in the workforce, and equality of opportunity is guaranteed by law. But one area where marked inequality still exists is in men and women’s salaries. Since 1996 a new system of sanctions has existed for violation of the law, for example on maternity and paternity protection.

Singapore

The National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) has worked closely with government and employers to offer education and training programmes to women re-entering the workforce, and establish family-friendly and flexible working arrangements. It has organised workplace seminars and meetings to raise awareness about women’s health. Leadership training programmes have been designed to give information on the rights of women workers and on violence towards women.

The NTUC Women’s Committee is responsible for policy at national level, while women coordinators or committees deal with women’s issues in affiliated unions.

Women are encouraged to take up leadership positions, and the NTUC offers training and enhance their effectiveness.

- **Status of women:** the NTUC says there is little discrimination in employment in Singapore due to the shortage of labour. Statistics show more women in managerial and professional posts, and more of them aware of their legal rights at home and in the workplace. However, it has recently launched a Skills Redevelopment Programme to boost employability, and encourages “life-long learning” for women workers.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** the NTUC works harmoniously with a growing network of NGOs to achieve common goals. This allows more cost-effective dissemination of information to women on issues such as breast and cervical cancer, leading to increased awareness among women workers of the importance of regular health checks. Other issues have included persuading employers to adopt flexible working patterns, to enable women to reconcile work and family needs.

Slovakia

The Women's Committee of the Confederation of Trade Unions of the Slovak Republic (CTU SR) is represented on the Coordination Board for Women, set up by the Slovak government in March 1999 to act as a consultative, coordinating and initiating body on women's policy. The Committee has also carried out research on women in affiliated unions. Trade union policy is to promote equal rights in the family, employment and the community, with stress on women's health care at work. However, the CTU SR says many obstacles still exist to putting these objectives into practice. Women are still poorly represented in union structures, and a priority of the confederation's fourth congress will be promoting women's participation at all levels.

Spain

A number of agreements on job security, part-time work and other issues affecting female workers have been concluded, thanks to union pressure.

The Comisiones Obreras (CC.OO), which drew up an Equal Opportunities Plan (1997-2000), has set up women's sections at all levels and pushed for more women in decision-making positions. It has also undertaken awareness-raising campaigns and training and taken steps to include women's promotion, pay and health in collective bargaining, with specific measures on pregnant women and muscular injuries, from which women suffer in particular.

The confederation has developed projects, with the support of European Union on promoting positive actions in companies and combating sexual harassment at the workplace.

The CC.OO's main strategies focus on a gender perspective in collective bargaining, women's recruitment, training trade union officials, improving women's working conditions and achieving equal pay.

- **Status of women:** measures have been introduced on reconciling work and private life, maternity protection, domestic violence, etc, but more needs to be done.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** the CC.OO women's secretariat is part of the Spanish representation to the European Women's Lobby. The confederation has cooperated with NGOs on a wide range of issues, including the preparation of an alternative report.

Sweden

The Swedish trade union confederation (LO) has taken part in follow-up meetings organised by the government. It has been active since 1995 on equal pay; women's representation in the trade union and political life; mainstreaming; culture; equality labelling of companies; parental leave - especially paternity leave; and sexual harassment.

Within the LO, women's representation has increased at central, and above all at local and regional level. The confederation has been collaborating with NGOs for more than 30 years.

USA

The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organisations (AFL-CIO) is briefed by the President's Interagency Council on Women, set up in 1995 to coordinate implementation of the Platform for Action. The AFL-CIO set up its Working Women's Department in 1995 to coordinate the federation's efforts to strengthen women's power in the workplace and society and build social and economic justice.

- **Status of women:** More women have joined the workforce, yet they have fallen behind in terms of job security, wages and benefits. New laws, such as the Family Medical Leave Act, give some cause for optimism.
- **Cooperation with NGOs:** The AFL-CIO has worked with NGOs in preparing for Beijing+5, and will continue to join them in lobbying the government to meet its commitments to equal rights for women.

Zimbabwe

The central strategy of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU) is to empower women and educate them on economic and constitutional issues. It has been working on institutional mechanisms for women's advancement, training women to take a stronger role in decision-making, and combating violence.

Women's structures have been set up in 21 affiliated unions, and 'gender perspective teams' introduced. The ZCTU has changed its constitution to provide for a female vice-president, while the chairperson, secretary and one member of the Women's Advisory Committee also sit on the General Council.

- **Status of women:** A new law has given women equal rights to inherit property, and more of them have been elected into political positions, but there is still much to be done to change traditional cultural attitudes to gender, reports the ZCTU. However, there have already been significant changes within the labour movement, and women's networking between unions and NGOs has given them confidence to tackle a broader range of issues.

IMPLEMENTING UN AND ILO CONVENTIONS

One of the ICFTU's key demands is for governments to respect their commitments and ratify a series of international conventions relating to women, as rapidly as possible.

At the 44th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, held immediately before the Beijing+5 PrepCom in New York in March, six more signatories added their names to the Optional Protocol to the 1979 **Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women** (CEDAW). The Optional Protocol was

adopted by the UN General Assembly in October 1999 and offers individual women a mechanism for taking up complaints of sexual discrimination with the UN. It has now been signed by 35 countries, but has yet to be ratified by any of them. Angela King, special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on gender issues and the advancement of women, described the Protocol as one of the most visible outcomes of the follow-up to Beijing, and expressed confidence that the instrument would enter into force before the end of the year. In order to do so, it must be ratified by at least 10 states.

The Convention itself has been ratified by 165 countries. However, many members of the CSW were critical of the 21-year delay in reaching the goal of universal ratification.

Some governments have signed the Convention, but with reservations. India, for instance, according to HMS, pleaded that religion is a personal matter and thus outside the rules. "Far too often, women's lives are governed by edicts and pronouncements of men who, under the pretext of religion or culture, relegate women to the lowest rung of society", (*End Discrimination: Equality for Women Now! 17th ICFTU World Congress Resolution, April 2000*).

Other international instruments have even further to go. After four years, ILO **Convention 175** on part-time work has been ratified by only four governments, Cyprus, Finland, Guyana and Mauritius, and **Convention 177** on homework by only two: Finland and Ireland.

At the ICFTU's Seventh World Women's Conference, delegates launched a campaign for ratification, and called on unions to lobby parliaments, work with NGOs, and increase public awareness of the issues.

In India, HMS has pressed hard for ratification of Convention 177. When the government sought to amend the Factory Act to allow women to work at night, without regulating their hours or guaranteeing the right to association or collective bargaining, it was blocked by fierce opposition from trade unionists.

The ICFTU is also pressing for ratification of ILO **Convention 156** on workers with family responsibilities.

Presently, unions are carrying out a vigorous worldwide campaign, 'Maternity 2000', to ensure that the June ILO Conference debates on the revision of **Convention 103 (1952)** on Maternity Protection, will result in the adoption of an international instrument containing greatly improved minimum standards.

The ratification and implementation of such international instruments is vital to enhancing the lives of women workers. "That is what we are fighting for," says Elsa Ramos, Director of the ICFTU Equality Department.

BETTER MATERNITY PROTECTION

“The first step of our campaign to achieve real standards of maternity protection is to ensure that the new ILO Convention for Maternity Protection is the best standard possible.”

ICFTU - Maternity Protection 2000

Since 1999, negotiations have been going on within the ILO to agree a new standard for maternity protection. Maternity protection has been an ILO responsibility since 1919, and is currently covered by **Maternity Protection Convention 103** and **Recommendation 95** (revised 1952). The employers claim the existing instrument is too rigid, but workers’ representatives believe it is too weak, and that a new Convention must demonstrate a real commitment to meeting the needs of working mothers.

So far, employers have resisted these demands and refused to increase the 12-week maternity leave period.

“After Beijing, world consciousness about women’s issue was raised. But who would have thought we would have had such a difficult time convincing employers and governments that high standards of maternity protection are necessary?” demands Elsa Ramos.

The Seventh World Women’s Conference called for the revised convention to include:

- full pay during maternity leave;
- increased pre- and post-natal benefits;
- a minimum 14-week leave period which includes 6 weeks' compulsory leave, after childbirth;
- existing legal rights to be retained and strengthened.

Security for working women before, during and after childbirth is fundamental to achieving equal rights in the workplace.

In 1998, all the members of the ILO adopted the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work. In doing so, the organisation’s member states solemnly pledged themselves to work towards realising the fundamental principles of the ILO and its core standards. The Declaration includes specific commitments to respect and promote:

- freedom of association and the effective recognition of the right to collective bargaining;
- the elimination of all forms of forced or compulsory labour;
- the effective abolition of child labour; and
- the elimination of discrimination in respect of employment and occupation.

The Declaration reminds governments that, by their very membership of the ILO, they have endorsed the principles and rights enshrined in its constitution, and that they have an obligation to implement its overall objectives even if they have not ratified individual Conventions.

1995-2000 - HOW WOMEN ARE BEING LET DOWN

AN OVERVIEW

In July 1999, ICFTU-APRO women met in Kathmandu to assess regional progress in implementing the Platform for Action. They found that no governments had ignored the PFA. However, “plans tend to be either outdated and/or to have official policies without sufficient implementation programming or funding. While important, the plans are not the highest or most urgent priority, and in spite of new efforts, there is no significant difference to the life and work of women.”

They concluded that despite the introduction of new laws, “the reality of women’s lives has not generally improved and the working lives of women in almost all sectors of employment has deteriorated.”

By April 2000, 117 of the 187 countries that adopted the PFA had submitted their National Plans of Action to the UN, plus five interregional, regional or subregional plans from CARICOM, the European Union, the Commonwealth, the League of Arab States, and the Indochina Plan.

In its 1998 progress report on implementation, *Mapping Progress*, the Women’s Environment and Development Organisation (WEDO) found that 58 countries had adopted legislation or policies on women’s rights. Among them, 26, including China, New Zealand, and Latin American and Caribbean states, had passed laws to curb domestic violence.

In relation to employment, 22 reporting countries (17%) had introduced laws or policies to promote equal opportunities for women at work. New Zealand’s National Action Plan highlighted the need for research on the gender pay gap, and on unpaid work and its contribution to the economy. However, cutbacks in support services resulting from economic liberalisation had undermined women’s ability to compete for work.

Included in the plethora of reasons for lack of progress and national action plans remaining “more plans than action” are:

- weakness of democratic political institutions;
- absence of a vigorous civil society;
- resurgence of right-wing forces implacably opposed to women’s rights to equality and freedom;
- profligate defence spending;
- the devastation caused by armed conflicts and their aftermath;
- constraints imposed by a voracious global economy;
- austerity measures for debt servicing.

A range of macroeconomic policies have exacerbated women’s inequality, but “only a small minority of governments acknowledge the fact, and fewer still have programmes to offset such impact.”

SPECIFIC CAUSES FOR CONCERN

MIGRANT WORKERS

Globalisation has created unprecedented numbers of migrant workers, and women make up a growing proportion of them. An ICFTU report found nearly half a million Sri Lankan women emigrants in the Middle East, and women outnumbering men by 12/1 among inter-Asian migrants from the Philippines, while the number of illegal refugees can only be guessed at. Vulnerable, mobile workers have become the new trade commodity, moved like any other item of goods from country to country, to meet economic requirements.

For women, the price is high. "Emigration often leads to a breakdown in family life. This is felt particularly acutely when it is the woman who leaves," reported the ICFTU. In Sri Lanka, where 500,000 women - many of them married with children - have left to look for work, the government has launched research into the social and economic impact.

Most migration takes place between the countries of the South, and the majority of workers are unskilled and poorly educated. They tend to end up in low-paid, low status work, facing isolation and discrimination.

The ICFTU believes migrants should be treated as other workers, with the same rights and protection. Legal instruments exist to defend them, including UN Convention 158 on the protection of migrant workers (1990), and a series of ILO Conventions and Recommendations. But once again they are not enforced. Trade unions are pressing at national and international level for them to be ratified and implemented.

The Seventh World Women's Conference recommended a series of measures to defend migrant and ethnic minority women, including positive action to integrate them into trade unions.

WOMEN IN EXPORT PROCESSING ZONES

"The export processing zones in the developing countries are the scene of some of the most horrible forms of exploitation of workers of both sexes."

Nancy Riche, Chairperson, ICFTU Women's Committee

Export processing zones make money in developing countries by exploiting cheap labour, but they make a farce of moves to achieve justice for working women. Hazardous working conditions, union busting and sexual discrimination are commonplace. Sacking is the penalty for trying to organise - the Central de Trabajadores Democraticos (CTD) has already taken legal action on behalf of more than 300 women for unfair dismissal.

In countries where labour legislation has been extended to the zones - as in El Salvador in 1997 - little has changed.

Trade union solidarity is the only way women can improve their pay and conditions. But the campaign to organise was hit hard by the economic crisis in Asia and South America. In 1996-7, the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines was creating one new union a month in the zones. In 1998, as the crisis kicked in and fears of redundancy increased, this fell to just eight unions in the year.

THE INFORMAL SECTOR

Over the last five years, deregulation, restructuring and business's demands for an increasingly flexible workforce have continued to force workers to seek a living from temporary and unprotected jobs. Home and teleworking, piece work, casual and seasonal work, domestic and agricultural labour, street vending - there are innumerable aspects to the informal sector, but they share the absence of social protection and workers' rights, and often form part of the 'black economy'.

The informal sector employs a very high proportion of women due to discrimination in recruitment, poor educational standards, and inadequate childcare facilities, making it difficult for women to obtain and hold down 'formal' jobs.

The trade unions now consider as priority organising women in the informal sector, as well as 'atypical' workers on part-time, short-term, or temporary contracts, and helping them to win the protection of labour legislation and social security.

UNEMPLOYMENT AMONG WOMEN

The financial crisis which moved from Asia, to Russia, and on to Brazil in the years between 1997 and 1999 brought with it waves of redundancies which hit women especially hard. Women workers were the victims of mass dismissals, and ever more precarious forms of employment. In some countries, women were expected to sacrifice their own incomes in order to make more work available for men.

According to the Inter-American Development Bank, the majority of Latin America's 10 million unemployed in 1999 were women and young people under 25. Yet this figure did not include the informal sector, where 56% of the working population labour with no social protection. In Brazil, the CUT reported that female unemployment increased from 39% of jobless people in 1991 to 45% in 1997.

Furthermore, according to the UN, many women in developing countries who grow food for their families or work as seasonal agricultural labourers are not classed as unemployed, even though "in terms of income, use of skills and productivity", they should be.

According to the Canadian Labour Congress, cuts in public spending contributed to deep job losses, especially among women from ethnic minorities, in sectors like government, education and health. Once unemployed, women have also found it harder to get back into work. In Korea, the FKTU found evidence of “a new type of unemployment, affecting highly-trained women, which clearly shows that women are finding it increasingly difficult to enter the labour market.”

The ILO’s latest unemployment statistics show that in 73% of the countries which provide figures, a higher proportion of women than men are out of work.

WOMEN IN POVERTY

In the experience of the ICFTU, over the last five years, “poverty has not retreated”. Of the 2 billion people estimated to be living in poverty worldwide, 70% are women and children. In some countries, World Development indicators issued by the World Bank show poverty has escalated since 1995, again due largely to the economic crisis. In Indonesia, for example, between 1996 and 1998 the proportion of people living below the poverty line almost doubled, to 20.3%.

Lack of education is a major factor in perpetuating both poverty and ill-health. Educated women tend to have smaller families and healthier children, and yet there are still 855 million illiterate adults in the world, of whom nearly two-thirds are female, says UNICEF. Some of the worst female illiteracy rates in the world, according to UNESCO, exist in African states such as Burkina Faso, Guinea Bissau and Niger, where in 1998, between 80 and 93% of women over 15 were illiterate, together with Cambodia (80%).

Another factor has been the increase in family break-down and the growing number of single-parent households, especially in industrialised countries. Research has confirmed that women struggling to bring up children by themselves are more likely to be living in poverty.

UNEQUAL PAY

Strategic Objective F5(a) calls on governments, employers, employees, trade unions, and women’s organisations to:

“Implement and enforce laws and regulations and encourage voluntary codes of conduct that ensure that international labour standards, such as ILO Convention no. 100 on equal pay and workers’ rights, apply equally to female and male workers.”

Equal pay is another area where little progress has been made in five years. In Brazil, for example, whatever their job or level of education, whether in rural areas or cities, women earn less than men. In industry, women receive on average only 56% of the male salary. In the service sector, although slightly better, the figure is still only 70% of male monthly income.

The European Women's Lobby, in its *Regional Alternative Report* for Beijing+5, describes "the inability of the European Union to tackle the pay gap" as "one of the most serious policy failures in relation to equal opportunities. Despite the fact that there has been EU legislation for more than 40 years prohibiting unequal pay, the gap has remained almost the same. Existing policies have proven ineffective in addressing the structural nature of the pay gap.

In its Equality Plan 1999, the European Trade Union Confederation identified the issue of equal pay as one of its priority areas for future work. It will launch in July 2000 an equal pay campaign the key objectives of which are to: develop strategies for action both nationally and at European level to achieve equal pay; increase opportunities for influencing the collective bargaining process by developing a list of tools to tackle the pay gap; and create and maintain an Equal Pay Website containing information, data, examples of good collective agreements, recent judgements on equal pay, a tool kit, etc.

WOMEN IN CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

According to a 1999 survey of 900 enterprises, and interviews with over 500 women, workplace discrimination is still commonplace in Bulgaria, Poland, Russia and Ukraine. "Women suffer disproportionately from the negative consequences of privatisation and the transition to a free market system," concludes the study by Women, Law and Development International, a US human rights organisation. Unfair dismissal and hiring practices, wage discrimination, sexual harassment and chronic unemployment are widespread. In Ukraine, for example, between 1994 and 1998, 80% of the jobs lost through restructuring were women's. The report confirms the findings of a UN survey last September, which concluded that moves towards a market economy in these countries had failed to change sexist attitudes.

An alternative report on the Polish Government's implementation of the Platform for Action, compiled by the Women's Association for Gender Equality - Beijing 1995, in Warsaw, drew the following conclusions on women in the economy:

- unemployment among women is still high, and not decreasing. Thus, existing governmental activities to counter unemployment are not working;
- jobless women are not encouraged to start their own businesses, and receive no information to help them;
- for women who do want to start their own businesses, there is a lack of specialist training, consultancy, or credit facilities;
- high levels of professional segregation in the labour market discriminate against women.

The ICFTU Women's Network in Central and Eastern Europe is implementing a two-year programme to developing coherent gender policies and realistic plans of action to tackle the overwhelming challenges facing women workers and trade unions in the region.

WOMEN WITH DISABILITIES

Strategic objective F5: Calls on governments, employers, employees, trade unions and women's organisations to:

“Implement and monitor positive public- and private-sector employment, equity and positive action programmes to address systemic discrimination against women in the labour force, in particular women with disabilities and women belonging to other disadvantaged groups, with respect to hiring, retention, and promotion, and vocational training of women in all sectors.”

It was Justice Daniel Aganyanya, a prominent Kenyan judge, who in 1998 described women with disabilities as “the poorest of the poor”. In both developed and developing countries, they are routinely denied services enjoyed by other citizens, with few if any rights of redress. There is little indication that this situation has improved since 1995, and indeed much evidence to suggest it has got worse.

This was confirmed in 1998, by the special adviser to the Director-General of the ILO, Ali Taqi. “The new economic reality - growing global competition, shrinking profit margins, a declining resource base - is forcing firms the world over to seek ways of decreasing personnel costs, but such cost reductions should not come on the backs of disabled workers,” he declared. “Staying in work has become more difficult for workers with disabilities in general, due to the deregulation of the labour market in many countries, and as a result of pressures on enterprises to remain competitive in an increasingly global market.”

In both the jobs market and education, women with disabilities face double discrimination: as women and as a result of their disability. Rates of illiteracy are high among disabled women in developing countries, and generally they have fewer educational qualifications than their non-disabled counterparts.

Governments that have introduced statutory employment quotas for disabled people have failed to enforce them, or allowed employers to get round their obligations by fines or levies. However, in some countries trade unions have started to work in social partnership with companies and NGOs to negotiate changes in work organisation on behalf of disabled people. For example, in Portugal, unions worked with the car component manufacturer Yazaki Saltano to recruit 32 women with disabilities, all of whom were offered indefinite contracts. Changes were made to the production line, and the company's human resources department provided ongoing support for the workers and their families. Such local initiatives could make a radical difference if introduced globally.

PROSTITUTION, VIOLENCE, AND THE GIRL CHILD

“Violence against women is an obstacle to the achievement of the objectives of equality, development and peace. Violence against women both violates and impairs or nullifies the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”

Beijing Platform for Action

“The link between the crisis and the general rise in violence is obvious,” reported *Trade Union World* in 1999, backing up this view with evidence from Brazil. A number of ICFTU affiliates have drawn attention to the ongoing problem of violence, and the steps they have taken to combat it since 1995.

Furthermore, unemployment and poverty have brought with them increased female prostitution and sex trafficking. ILO expert Lin Lean Lim, warning of the impact of job losses in manufacturing and other sectors employing women, predicted: “Women whose incomes are vital for their families will be forced to work in the sex industry.” The sex industry has become “the most important underground economy” in countries like Thailand, says the ILO.

At the same time, more girl children are being sexually exploited, sometimes as the only source of income for impoverished families. UNICEF research found some 1 million children a year being drawn into the global sex trade, starting at an ever younger age. It estimated up to 800,000 children in the sex industry in Thailand, and 4-500,000 in India, highlighting the number of young girls being kidnapped and smuggled in from Nepal. In South and Central America thousands of street children are forced into prostitution to survive.

UNICEF’s world conference on the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Stockholm in 1996, signalled a huge increase in global awareness of the problem. New programmes have been introduced, such as the EU’s Daphne initiative to combat violence against children, young persons and women. Some developed countries have adopted laws to stop their citizens practising ‘sex tourism’ abroad, but few successful prosecutions have been carried out.

THE WORLD MARKET

These days it is no longer even national governments who have the final say - they are at the mercy of the undemocratic and unaccountable bodies which rule over the global economy: bodies like the World Trade Organisation, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank.

The ICFTU has drawn attention to their destructive impact on women workers, and called for “a modernisation of the institutions and rules that govern world financial markets.”

“At first sight, economic globalisation is gender neutral. But appearances can be deceptive,” warns Amanda Villatoro, Political and Education Secretary of ICFTU-ORIT (ICFTU regional organisation for the Americas). “It is obvious that the type of liberalisation we have seen so far has a negative impact on workers in general, and that women are the hardest hit.”

- “The international trade union movement believes there is an urgent need to elaborate a new strategy in which international trade and core labour standards are closely linked,” stated the ICFTU before the opening of the abortive Millennium Round of WTO negotiations in Seattle last November. It called for greater transparency within the WTO;
- a reference to international commitments to achieve sustainable development;
- better scrutiny of multinational companies;
- the right of states to regulate all areas they believe necessary to achieve their social and environmental objectives;
- genuinely equitable trade.

Together with a vast number of NGOs and - as demonstrations in Washington and Seattle have shown - individual citizens, the ICFTU believes social clauses safeguarding human rights must be written into the WTO’s rules. At Seattle, the movement argued for a permanent mechanism to be integrated into the WTO structure to address labour standards. Protection for workers’ rights should include a ban on discrimination against women, equal pay and opportunities, maternity protection and freedom from violence.

The ICFTU has called on governments worldwide to stop surrendering their responsibilities. Last year, General Secretary Bill Jordan condemned “an international community that is incapable of preventing financial crises from erupting and spreading.” He called on governments to enter into negotiations with unions over economic development plans which would at the same time protect vulnerable sections of society, including women. “It is equally urgent for governments worldwide to take concerted steps to regain control over the economy, regulate world financial markets and stop abdicating their power to the so-called invisible, yet devastating, hand of the market,” he added.

THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT: A CENTRAL PLAYER IN THE STRUGGLE FOR EQUAL RIGHTS

WOMEN IN THE WORKFORCE

Throughout the world, women are steadily increasing their share of the labour market, and that growth is predicted to continue. The highest proportion is found, according to ILO figures, in Eastern Europe, where 48% of the workforce is female. Even in regions where the ratio of economically active women is expected to remain steady or decline marginally, as in Eastern Europe, that trend is not reflected in crude activity rates, where women’s participation continues to rise.

Women now play a fundamental part in the global economy, not only - as they have always done - in unpaid and unrecognised labour, but as an almost equal proportion of the workforce. Their voices must be heard not only on the shopfloor and in the office, but in the fields, the home, the streets, and the myriad other locations where women must struggle to earn a living.

Women as a proportion (%) of the workforce - by region

	1995	2000	2010 (PROJECTION)
World	40.3	40.66	41.21
Developed regions	44.05	44.73	45.58
Less developed regions	39.28	39.63	40.27
Asia	39.82	40.11	40.57
Africa	40.17	40.51	41.27
Caribbean	37.77	38.74	40..23
Central America	31.33	33.05	36.23
South America	34.13	35.02	36.63
Northern America	45.13	45.96	46.98
Eastern Europe	47.69	48.22	48.21
Western Europe	42.18	42.72	43.70
Oceania	42.15	43.16	44.60
Australia-New Zealand	42.80	43.91	45.43

Source: International Labour Organisation

WHAT THE BEIJING PLATFORM FOR ACTION SAYS ABOUT UNION ORGANISATION

Strategic Objective F1(r) calls on governments to:

“Reform laws or enact national policies that support the establishment of labour laws to ensure the protection of all women workers, including safe work practices, the right to organise and access to justice.”

Strategic Objective F2(l) calls on governments to:

“Safeguard and promote respect for basic workers’ rights, including the prohibition of forced labour and child labour, freedom of association and the right to organise and bargain collectively, equal remuneration for men and women for work of equal value and non-discrimination in employment, fully implementing the conventions of the ILO in the case of State parties to those conventions and, taking into account the principles embodied in the case of those countries that are not parties to those conventions in order to achieve truly sustained economic growth and sustainable development.”

Strategic Objective F5(a), (h) and (i) call on governments, employers, employees, trade unions, and women’s organisations to:

“Implement and enforce laws and regulations and encourage voluntary codes of conduct that ensure that international labour standards, such as ILO Convention no.100 on equal pay and workers’ rights, apply equally to female and male workers.”

“Recognise collective bargaining as a right and as an important mechanism for eliminating wage inequality for women and to improve working conditions.”

“Promote the election of women trade union officials and ensure that trade union officials elected to represent women are given job protection and physical security in connection with the discharge of their functions.”

WHY TRADE UNIONS ARE SO IMPORTANT

The trade union women who met in Kathmandu and in Rio de Janeiro highlighted Beijing and its follow-up as a unique opportunity for trade unions to influence governments, “to focus on work issues, to make governments pay attention to unions and in order for unions to take the lead with NGOs”. Governments, they said, should recognise trade unions’ specialist role and expertise, distinguishing them from other NGOs.

On the other hand, they found a “mixed” pattern of consultation, with some governments engaging in only perfunctory discussion with unions, some anti-union, and others involving the movement in implementing strategies. They were concerned about whether workers’ concerns were adequately heard.

The ICFTU now represents some 48 million women workers in 216 affiliated trade union centres, in 145 countries. The trade unions play a unique role in society, creating solidarity between workers, representing their interests, enabling them to bargain for

better pay and working conditions, lobbying governments, educating, campaigning, and fighting for - in the words of the statement adopted by the ICFTU at its 17th World Congress in Durban in April 2000 - "a vision of what the world should be like in the 21st century".

"We want to achieve the full equality trade unions have worked long to attain, with a society free from discrimination based on race, colour, creed, political opinion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, health or age," it declared.

WOMEN NEED UNIONS ... AND UNIONS NEED WOMEN

This is the starting point of the major research project carried out by the ICFTU and the ILO in 1999 on *The Role of Trade Unions in Promoting Gender Equality and Protecting Vulnerable Women Workers*. The report details the enormous number of initiatives taken up by trade unions aimed at recruiting women, promoting their active participation, fostering equality in the workplace and introducing gender issues into collective bargaining, and forging alliances with other civil groups and organisations.

The casualisation of labour and the growth of the informal sector has made it increasingly difficult to organise women. Furthermore, in many places women are still denied their fundamental right to organise, and face the sack if they join a union. But as the individual reports above show, over the last five years, if not before, the movement has come to understand the vital importance of organising women to fight for better pay and conditions in all forms of work, not just in the traditional strongholds of manufacturing and heavy industry. The innovative strategies introduced to organise atypical workers include:

- special campaigns;
- changes in structure or constitution of the union;
- including atypical workers in collective agreements;
- forging alliances with atypical workers' organisations.

In sectors where trade union organisation is banned, such as export processing zones, wages are low and conditions hazardous. Twenty-five-year-old Julia Esperanza Quintanilla, who worked in a Korean-owned factory in El Salvador, died because her employers would not let her leave her work station to seek medical care; and she is not the only victim.

Yet in workplaces where women are organised into trade unions and know their rights, it has been shown that they win higher pay and better conditions.

In the past, equality-related issues were often treated as 'personal' or 'marginal' concerns, which would not be supported by the majority of members and were therefore left out of collective bargaining. This attitude has now changed. Trade unions recognise that gender inequalities must be addressed as a crucial contribution to social development and achieving a fairer society.

It has often been said that women are the future for the trade union movement. Women's membership of the ICFTU has grown by 5% in the last four years - they now make up 39% of members - while overall numbers have fallen, and this pattern is widely reflected in national unions and confederations. "Women are much more likely than men to account for the increases in union membership or, conversely, the fall in membership is more likely to be attributable to men than to women," reports the ICFTU/ILO survey. However, women still have a long way to go to reach parity in trade union decision-making, and the campaigns and structural changes described above demonstrate unions' determination to remedy this imbalance.

In Durban, the ICFTU Congress agreed to launch, in 2001, a three-year, worldwide campaign entitled *Organising for Equality*, aimed at doubling women's union membership, with special attention to those in the informal sector, EPZs and in atypical work.

As globalisation has advanced, the ICFTU has also developed its relationship with civil organisations which share its objectives.

TRADE UNIONS IN ACTION

Many steps have been taken to promote equal opportunities between women and men.

The 16th World Congress of the ICFTU in 1996 adopted a declaration on gender and equality entitled *Transforming the global market through women's equality*. The Congress ratified the overall declaration and recommendations from the ICFTU World Women's Conference in The Hague in October 1994. It also adopted a series of measures, including a ratio of at least 30% women to be included in all union activities and programmes.

The 80th meeting of the ICFTU Women's Committee, in Brussels in October 2000, heard firm evidence that governments have failed to take concrete action to implement the Platform for Action they adopted in Beijing, especially in the world of work, where equality between men and women has yet to be realised.

At the 17th ICFTU World Congress in April, the 1,100 delegates made a firm pledge to continue the struggle for equality between men and women and for social justice worldwide. The Congress also called on the ICFTU, its regional organisations, and its affiliates to step up their efforts to overcome gender discrimination, both at work and in society, through their three-year campaign.

A framework for cooperation with NGOs has been defined. The trade union movement understands the importance of solidarity, and the Women's Committee has made building solidarity among women trade unionists a priority, in order to create a dynamic force in the movement and in society. That is why the work of trade unions, and especially female trade unionists, must be united with the actions of other women. Our

struggle is not an isolated one, because women throughout the world share the same problems. This solidarity was clearly demonstrated by the trade union march, organised on 5 April in Durban, during the ICFTU Congress, in support of the World Women's March for an end to poverty and violence against women.

Thanks to the work carried out by the ICFTU Women's Committee, the ICFTU and its affiliates have adopted policies to promote women's role in the trade unions. The great majority of affiliated organisations have women's committees. More and more women are taking up decision-making positions at local, regional, national and international levels. Throughout the different regions, women are found as presidents, general secretaries, and in other less-traditional jobs such as treasurers, researchers, economists, negotiators and trainers. However, there is still much work to be done. The trade union movement still has a masculine face.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, implementing the commitments in the Beijing Platform for Action depends on political will, and virtually without exception, governments worldwide have shown a lack of courage to live up to their promises. Yet political will does not just happen. History shows that progress towards social justice has been driven every step of the way by the determination of the people. Campaigning, pressure, lobbying, political and industrial action are indispensable to getting results. Five years have passed since the PFA was agreed, but the next five years will really tell whether the commitment to build a better world for women has been taken seriously.

Women workers will continue to be present in the forefront of the struggle to defend their working and living standards throughout the world. We fully expect to play a role in the successful implementation of the decisions to be taken at the forthcoming UN Special Session. But we maintain that the overriding objective of the Beijing+5 meeting - and of Copenhagen + 5 - must be to ensure the full participation of trade unions and NGOs in putting into action measures to relieve poverty and incorporate employment promotion policies into national and international development plans.

In this context, the ILO – the only tripartite UN organisation – has a central role to play in following up the Special Session, and putting into practice its decisions relating to the PFA Strategic Objective F. on 'Women and the Economy'. A coordinated international programme to accelerate implementation of the PFA and the Nairobi forward-looking strategies, coupled with national policies drawn up in consultation with trade unions, are crucial to reducing unemployment and poverty among women, and establishing social stability throughout the world.

At the ICFTU World Congress in April, delegates adopted a statement on *Making Vision into Reality: Priorities for the ICFTU in the 21st Century* which acknowledged that "women are changing the face of our movement, bringing new energy and ideas to attack injustices old and new". It pledged to speed up the pace of change within the movement, to ensure that every ICFTU affiliate had a plan of action for gender equality.

Looking outwards, it committed the ICFTU to stepping up its campaign to ensure the interests of working women are fully reflected in the development of a new framework of international rules for the global economy, and giving the fight against discrimination at work the highest political commitment and resources to match.

Can the ICFTU's 21st Century vision of "a world free from poverty, free from discrimination and injustice" become a reality? "Our answer is yes!" came the resounding reply from the 1,100 ICFTU Congress delegates in Durban. "And we believe that the international free trade union movement is a force that can make it happen."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Implementing the commitments in the Beijing Platform for Action remains as urgent today as it was five years ago, but new steps must be taken to bring this about.

The free trade union movement pledges its active support for the implementation of the PFA. However, our ability to honour this promise depends also on the willingness of the UN and its member states to recognise our role in building international solidarity in support of employment, equality, peace and social justice.

The ICFTU believes that:

1. Governments must recommit themselves to implementing the PFA.
2. Measurable indicators of progress and specific targets and time frames for implementation must be introduced. The lack of such timed targets has been a major obstacle to reaching a meaningful assessment of progress over the last five years.
3. Governments must make firm financial commitments to back up their promises. Resources are vital to a successful outcome, and where necessary aid should be provided by developed nations to assist their poorer neighbours.
4. Governments should ratify and implement without delay the main UN and ILO Conventions designed to promote women's equality in the workplace and in society.
5. The trade union movement, as the body best qualified to represent the interests of working women, should be fully consulted at national, regional and international level on all relevant programmes designed to implement the Beijing Platform for Action.
6. International financial institutions should adopt adjustment programmes which promote good governance, respect for human and workers' rights, higher employment and a reduction in poverty. None of these objectives can be achieved unless they include, from the outset, a full gender perspective.

THE TRADE UNION VIEW

At the 44th Session of the CSW and the Beijing+5 PrepCom, in March 2000, the ICFTU, the Public Service International (PSI) and Education International (EI), united to put forward their own amendments.

They recalled that the ICFTU represents 125 million workers, 43 million of them women; the PSI represents 20 million, including 12 million women, and the EI 24 million, with 17 million women.

The coalition described the commitments in the PFA as “fundamental for the promotion of gender equality, sustainable development and peace”, and their application – in so far as it went – as “a turning point in the perception of the international community” on these issues. It called on the UN to take account of the concerns of all social sectors, and especially the labour movement, in its deliberations on the outcome document on the Beijing Platform for Action.

In particular, the partners highlighted as priority concerns to be addressed:

- The promotion of ILO Conventions, especially those covered by the Declaration of Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work and its follow-up, with a focus on gender-empowering dimensions;
- Recognition of the link between trade and basic workers’ rights;
- Macroeconomic policies and their impact on women;
- The importance of the trade union role in promoting equity in the workplace, and therefore the need for a guaranteed right to organisation and collective bargaining;
- Equal pay for work of equal value;
- Health and security at work – especially maternity protection;
- The importance of quality public education to enable girls to take control of their lives and avoid exploitation;
- Eliminating double discrimination towards women on grounds of their race, ethnicity, disability, age, sexual orientation, or as migrants.

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