



Exposing The Myths:

Organizing Women Around the World

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Myths about organizing women, and women of color in particular, prevent the labor movement from hearing and acting on the real opportunities to work together on issues that affect everyone. This article contributes to the burgeoning effort to listen to what women around the world are saying about their role in the labor movement. The article includes stories of women from the African country of Uganda and the Asian countries of Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Nepal.* These stories are not isolated incidents; they represent the growing participation of women in labor movements around the world. Gaining an appreciation for this growing participation will help lay to rest some of the widely-held myths about organizing women – myths that still persist after years of effort to combat them.

* Stories on Asian women workers are drawn from *Asia Women Workers Newsletter*, published by the Committee for Asian Women, Hong Kong: "Chemical Poisoning Among Women," 12 (3) July 1993; "Clerical Workers Organize," 13 (3) July 1993; "Organizing Women Workers," 13 (1) January 1993.

Stories about Ugandan women and Public Services International were provided by Andy Banks, Associate Editor, *LRR*.

Myth: Women are under-represented in unions around the world because they are afraid to join organizations and to fight against oppressive conditions.

As the stories that follow illustrate, it is not women's unwillingness to fight that is responsible for the perceived difficulty in organizing women workers. In fact, when unions make an effort to include women in their organizing strategy, women often become the most active members.

The first story, of study circles in Uganda, shows that improved organizing efforts can make a huge difference in women's union participation. The second story, of Sri Lankan women workers organizing against horrendous health and safety violations, helps belie the myth that women are by nature too fearful to fight against their employers.

Study Circles in Uganda

Prior to 1994, Uganda's public sector unions represented tens of thousands of members, but less than 100 of them were women. Public Services International (PSI), the *international trade union secretariat* representing public sector workers around the world, worked with the Ugandan affiliates to remedy this huge discrepancy. PSI and the existing women trade unionists formed women-only study circles. In these study circles, women met in small groups to discuss workplace problems and possible solutions. During these sessions, the women learned how the union could help them in implementing their solutions.

The change in women's union participation was dramatic. In only three years, thousands of women have become union members, and when the Ugandan Public Employees Union recently elected a new executive board, it included 40 percent women leaders.

Poisoned Workers Fight Back in Sri Lanka

In May 1993, 50 women who worked at Bartleet Microdevices in Sri Lanka were sent home after they developed headaches and vomiting. Eight days later, 109 women again developed headaches, dizziness and nausea. They were sent to a hospital, and the health authorities subsequently closed down the factory for two days.

Medical officers from the Occupational Health Division of the Ministry of Labor observed that workers were exposed to various chemicals, including cyclomethane, acetone, and methyl ethyl ketone. While workers maintained that about 45 types of chemicals were used at the factory, the company only showed 15 types to the medical officers.

During the time of inspections, all workers were kept out of work. A week later management shut down the factory and accused the union of inciting workers. When they later reopened, management asked all workers to join the company as new recruits.

All 900 former workers refused. They demanded that management reinstate all workers, compensate the workers who fell sick, and recognize the Free Workers Union which represented the workers.

After much negotiation, and intervention of the State Ministry of Labor, all of the workers were finally taken back. Management also agreed that the union and the Institute for Occupational Health and Safety would represent workers in further investigations.

Myth: It's too hard to organize part-time and temporary women workers.

Throughout the world, women have been forced to settle for part-time and temporary work, and unions have failed to see these workers as potential members. But these women workers are as eager as any to gain the benefits and job security of union representation.

Clerical Workers Organize

In South Korea, there are about 450,000 women working in offices that employ at least five workers. They constitute a third of the female workforce. Most are high-school graduates, and their numbers have increased as a result of the decline in manufacturing industries.

Before 1987, women were expected to resign from jobs at marriage or pregnancy. Through their active participation in clerical workers unions, women clerical workers have had this system abolished.

In recent years, the number of non-permanent women office workers has increased by leaps and bounds. Non-permanent employment of women takes different forms. In banks, women are hired as part-time workers while in insurance and security businesses, women are employed as temporary or "dispatch" workers. Normally, these casual workers comprise 30 to 50 percent of total staff, but there are places where the permanent staff are outnumbered by non-permanent staff. Most casual staff are single women.

Though few unions showed concern in helping non-permanent workers improve their working conditions and gain permanent status, some workers started to organize on their own initiative. One organizing effort took place in a bank which automated its telephone system ten years ago. Since then phone operators had been hired on a daily basis. They

had to renew their contracts annually and were not paid bonuses or for vacations. Finally, the workers joined together and met the bank owner. Since they had not had a wage increase for five years, they asked for a wage increase and they asked to be granted permanent status. Because of this action, two workers were fired.

The labor union also refused to let the workers join the union. Despite all of this, the workers formed themselves in a group called Han-oo-ri-hwei or "we are one." They gathered information on permanent employment, held discussions in the company, visited the union office every day, and called the union officers daily. They also studied labor law and the rules of employment, and sent the results of their study to the union. In this way they gained admission into the union and won the support of the union leaders who began to see the strength of these women workers.

The women's efforts paid off. Between 1989 and 1992 a few women telephone operators were transferred to permanent positions. By early 1993, all operators became permanent and their wages increased substantially as a result.

Myth: Women are hard to organize because they only want to work on "women's issues."

Identifying certain issues as female serves to make women's economic contributions and broader societal concerns marginal. In fact, "women's issues" affect every member of society and therefore should be union issues.

Women's Issues Strengthen the Unions in Uganda

The women in Uganda's public sector study circles realized that their concerns could best be resolved through collective bargaining, and their unions' legislative and education programs. Issues such as sexual harassment, wage discrimination, child care, maternity leave, and even breast feeding and AIDS were brought to the union as concerns that must be addressed.

Furthermore, women in the study circles were very clear that the unpaid work being done at home needed to be understood as having an effect on their paid work. This feeling was shared by women in other study circles in Africa. For example, women in Ghana drew a picture of an African woman with many arms simultaneously coping with myriad responsibilities. The picture was reproduced as the cover for future study circle guides.

A WOMAN'S DAILY ACTIVITIES —



WORK LOAD ON WOMEN IN GHANA

Based on the experiences of organizing women in Uganda, PSI has initiated a women's project in eight African countries, covering 33 public sector unions. The goal of the project is to build a women's committee and study group in each country, in each union, and in each local branch.

Each study group will train its members to be rank-and-file organizers and will forward the group's recommendations to the union. Everyone who attends the study circles is being asked to recruit three more women workers to join the union. This growth in women union members will provide the basis of union support for the study circles' recommendations.

LRR FOCUS: Work Unpaid, Voices Unheard

There are countless ways that prevailing economic theory dismisses and ignores the economic contributions of women. The labor movement's focus on paid work as the main arena for union struggle often makes "women's work" marginal. There is a connection between the lower wages received for "women's jobs" and the fact that women often do similar work at home for no wages. Any strategy for the labor movement to tackle organizing women workers in the global economy needs to recognize the multiple economic positions that we, as women, hold at work and at home.

Unions have made some strides toward addressing the unique needs of women workers. Unions have worked to ensure that women are not required to do traditional unpaid tasks, such as bringing coffee, picking up dry cleaning, and running household errands as part of their paid work. We only need to look to areas of traditional women's work, such as nursing, clerical work, and teaching to see that unions have also fought for adequate compensation for a variety of "feminine" skills.

Unions also have room to improve. When we think about work, we commonly accept the notion that jobs can be described by the degree of physical and intellectual labor involved. But, we ignore the value of emotional labor. As Arlie Hochschild has pointed out, we all notice when emotional labor is not being done – when the flight attendant is not smiling, when the waitress is grumpy, when the teacher doesn't really care. And those of us who have done emotional work know that it is as hard as physical or intellectual labor. However, the contribution of emotional work is not recognized and therefore not valued.

To understand just how and why women's economic contributions are overlooked, we need to look to prevailing economic theory that is based on the price of goods and services on the "open market." This theory does little to explain why certain goods and services are worth more than others. But when we begin to question the value attached to certain forms of work we find that the domains of work traditionally filled by women are not valued and often not even recognized as work.

The effect of this economic theory is that all over the world women are given primary responsibility for our families and social relationships, but no official recognition for this largely unpaid form of work. Raising a family counts for nothing in national measures of wealth, such as gross domestic product. Further, the value of our paid work reflects the fact that emotional labor is not recognized. Thus, much of our work does not count and our voices are not heard. It is the responsibility and struggle of leaders in the labor movement to make sure that our voices are heard and our contributions do count. ■

Fresh Vigor in Nepal

Study groups and workshops are not only taking place at the local level. Increasingly, women around the world have been coming together to hold multinational workshops on organizing women workers. One such workshop was held in Nepal in 1993. The women developed the following list of some of the steps necessary to organize women workers:

- Find out the situation of women workers, through informal discussion and contact with women, which may be carried out secretly or openly.
- Establish links with women workers. In many countries, government suppression of trade union activities and women workers' initial fear of joining trade unions have led to alternative forms of organization, such as centers for women workers, libraries, drama groups, and health clinics. These often serve as initial encounter points between workers and organizers.
- Provide service to workers. Many organizations provide health services, legal aid, consumers' co-operatives, literacy classes, and library services to workers. These help the organizers to establish contact with the workers and build trust among workers and organizers. Moreover these services serve the immediate needs of women workers.
- Build women leadership and consolidate women workers organizations. Training and building leadership is an important part of consolidating their organizations. Women leaders also serve as models for encouraging other women workers to become active and self-confident.
- Offer support in times of struggle.
- Establish solidarity links and cooperation among various organizations, including trade unions, women's organizations, research groups, media, and other non-governmental organizations. These solidarity links are crucial to winning gains for women workers.

What stands out about this outline is the breadth of its vision. Rather than limiting themselves to a narrow set of beliefs about what a union is and can be, these women offered a wide range of approaches to successful organizing in their own particular conditions. This broader vision of unionism should not be interpreted as a burden for unions but as an essential part of making unions truly relevant for today's world.

From Uganda to Sri Lanka and around the world, women bring unique strengths and perspectives to the labor movement. As their voices drown out the myths around organizing women, these strengths and perspectives will be key to building a more powerful movement. ■