



**SPECIAL
REPORT**



CULTURAL CHANGE IN LATIN AMERICAN UNIONS

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Improving gender equality for women at work and increasing their participation in trade unions remains a big challenge, particularly in Latin America. In countries like Brazil and the Dominican Republic, there have been important cultural changes in trade union thinking that have opened the way for women to take on leadership positions. However, this has yet to take place in the rest of the continent.

In recent times, women in Latin America have begun to work in almost all sectors of the economy, including those traditionally regarded as the preserve of men.

According to the International Labour Organisation, female participation in the Latin American labour force grew at an annual rate of 4.1 per cent in the 1990s, compared to 2.6 per cent for men. There are several reasons for this trend, including women's greater access to education and the increase in poverty, which has forced women to seek paid employment. However, most women's jobs are casual and informal.

Liberalisation of the economy in many Latin American countries has led women to take a more active role in labour issues, mainly in relation to the disadvantages they suffer because of a lack of gender equity.

The most dramatic situation experienced by women occurs in processing plants (maquilas). In Mexico, women accounted for 58 per cent of non-specialised personnel in 1996 and the percentage was higher in Central America, reaching 95 per cent in Panama. In Costa Rica, El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala, Panama and the Dominican Republic, textile, clothing and electronic assembly factories employ more than 500,000 people. Most of these factories are owned by Koreans, Taiwanese and North Americans and export to the United States.

A study carried out by the World Confederation of Labour (WCL), entitled "El fenómeno maquilador en México y Honduras" describes the situation of women workers and highlights the lack of equal pay between men and women for the same work. "In general, they are subjected to sexual harassment, insults, humiliation and even corporal punishment when they do not fulfil their production quotas. The long working days standing up, the work-related stress, poor workplace ventilation and prolonged urine retention cause health problems such as vomiting, sinusitis and allergies," says the report.

WOMEN'S PARTICIPATION IN UNIONS

Although women's participation in the Latin American labour force has increased, their participation in trade unions is very low. The challenge of including women in the world of work has not been accepted in the region. The governments of developing countries repress trade unions and most women workers are not union members, with very few of them exercising a leadership role within trade unions.

There are various reasons for this and one of them is the reluctance of male-dominated trade unions to change their culture. Another reason is that women do not have time to deal with trade union issues, because their domestic responsibilities take precedence and very few men share these responsibilities, which is a significant barrier that must be overcome.

It is in this context, that the International Metalworkers' Federation is developing strategies to resolve the specific problems of women workers.

One of the greatest challenges that must be overcome in Latin America is to increase the number of women trade union members. To achieve this, trade unions must work for greater legal protection for women workers on issues such as maternity rights and equal pay, and work with members to ensure that women participate directly in collective bargaining, an important mechanism to improve respect for their rights.

IMF RESPONDS

At the 31st IMF World Congress in 2005, IMF changed its statutes to ensure that at least six women are on its Executive Committee, whereas previously there were none. The result was that eight women were elected to the Executive Committee, two of whom are from Latin America. At the same time the IMF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean began to refocus work to increase women's participation in trade unions.

Women's participation in trade union activities in the region has grown, especially in the Southern Cone, Central American and Caribbean sub-regions. IMF initiatives such as the Regional Gender Council (composed of both female and male leaders, with the latter accounting for 25 per cent of positions), have contributed to this growth.

There has also been an increase in the number of women's regional meetings, reflecting the gradual emergence of very committed and active women leaders in affiliated unions. These have been prompted by the IMF's Equal Rights Department, which has encouraged unions to follow the IMF Action Programme to increase women's representation.

THE GENDER BATTLE

Many people might ask why it is important that women are represented in trade unions. The IMF believes that all workers should enjoy equal rights, independently of their

gender, age, ethnicity, nationality, sexual preferences and religion. To achieve this, trade unions must be aware of the problems and needs of women if they are to promote respect for their rights.

"If the unions are going to promote social justice and equal opportunities, end discrimination and improve the quality of life of their members and workers in general, one of the basic steps to achieve these strategic policy objectives is to get women into trade union leadership positions so that they participate directly in union activities and actions, such as collective bargaining and in the whole trade union struggle," says Jenny Holdcroft, IMF equal rights director.

She adds that, "the women who have taken on leadership positions did not achieve this only by 'defending women' but also by fighting, shoulder to shoulder, with men to win labour, social and economic rights for all workers."

CULTURAL CHANGE IN AFFILIATED UNIONS

Recently, there has been significant progress in changing the culture of unions to be more representative of women. However this cannot be shown in quantitative terms, because the changes are in people's perception of gender issues. For example, there is greater concern about the situation of women workers and trade unionists now discuss gender and are beginning to work on the issue.

In the last five years, women union leaders in Latin America have played an important role in the struggle to integrate women into trade union structures and have actively participated in women's meetings and conferences.

Among the trade unions that have experienced a cultural change, the metalworker unions in Brazil stand out. In this country women are already well integrated into trade union structures and are participating more, working in all sectors of the economy, especially in the electronics industry. The Women's Commissions of the three main trade union centres (CUT, CGT and Força Sindical) introduced minimum quotas for women at all leadership levels, which were adopted by the organisations.

Brazil's CNTM/FS says that this change is reflected in the leadership posts that women occupy on the union executive now that they are seen as relevant to the organisation. Women used to be only members or

occupied less relevant positions or acted as substitutes, but this has changed in recent years.

Nair Goulart, President of Força Sindical in the state of Bahia, Brazil and a member of the IMF Executive Committee, says that more women now work in the metalworking and motor industries but they are not represented in the trade unions. "In Brazil, ten per cent of leadership positions in the metalworkers' unions are occupied by women but there were none when I began to be active in the trade union movement twenty years ago."

Brazil's CNM/CUT has seen similar changes and reports that women have been increasingly active in the union in recent years. CNM passed a resolution to guarantee participation of women in all events, including congresses, plenaries and other meetings and also to guarantee a minimum of 30 per cent women's representation on executive committees of confederations, federations and its trade union central. "However, as union membership is about 50 per cent women should also be reflected in the composition of the leadership," believes Emilia Valente, member of CNM/CUT National Executive Committee and member of the IMF Executive Committee.

"But we don't want women just to make up the numbers or just because it is politically correct to have women in the unions. We want them there so they can contribute to workers' struggles and help to change the culture within the unions. We now have women presidents and general secretaries leading unions and conducting collective bargaining with the same rights as men," said Emilia.

In the Dominican Republic, casual work has had a major impact and it has been difficult to recruit members, especially in the Free Trade Zones. The working day is long, there are no canteens, there is insufficient transport to get to the factories, workers have to clean other areas after cleaning their own, there is a lack of bathrooms for the number of people and workers are charged for the water they drink. This is why the IMF focused on women workers in this country in conjunction with the National Federation of Miners and Metalworkers (Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Mineros y Metalúrgicos – FENATRAMIM).

Francía Sosa, a FENATRAMIM member, says that previously, "women hardly used to participate at all, but the work that began approximately five years ago resulted in a change. About 30-35 per cent of leaders are now women. We

Alba Colombo

UNTRMRA Uruguay

"I see no sign of any major change, so we need to work much harder, and get ourselves better organised."



Nohora Tovar

FETRAMECOL Colombia

"The incorporation of women into trade union activities has generated changes, but not as much as it should have done, because the structures are much the same."



Six delegates to the IMF Women's Workshop held in Bahia, Brazil in November 2007 were asked if the inclusion of women has resulted in a change in culture within trade unions.



Categorisation of countries with regard to cultural change and the inclusion of women into trade unions.



ACTIVITIES ON GENDER IN LATIN AMERICA PROPOSED BY THE IMF:

- Increase the institutional space for women to increase their power in trade unions by involving them in the leadership and internal activities of the trade union struggle.
- Carry out actions against any kind of violence and discrimination against women, such as moral and sexual harassment and domestic violence.
- Seek compliance with ILO Conventions on women workers' rights.
- Lead the struggles for the respect of rights in national legislation and collective agreements.
- Work towards an equal society that guarantees better working conditions for men and women.
- Consolidate the IMF's gender policy.

Francia Sosa says that unions need to continue working to include women in countries where their representation is very low, for example, in Colombia, where women in the Federation of Metalworkers (FETRAMECOL) say they have not been able to ensure implementation of the union's policy to include them. In addition, there is strong discrimination on the grounds of age, physical condition and civil status at the workplace, and most women spend their time doing domestic work without pay or welfare provisions.

The Metalworkers' and Miners' Federation of Honduras says the problem is that men have the greatest say in society and this hampers efforts by women to play a role. The union also says that the nature of the work means there are few women members. However, those women that are members do participate well. They highlight the fact that many women workers are single mothers and so it is difficult for them to reconcile trade union activities and family duties.

In Uruguay, two years ago, there was a change in the situation of women in trade unions because gender issues began to be included in collective agreements. The executive of the National Metalworkers' Union (UNTMRA) has eleven members, only one of whom is a woman, and the national leadership has 25 members and ten deputies,

are very grateful to the IMF's Equal Rights Department, because it was the proposals we developed together that have helped maintain the work done by the women's team and participation has increased. We have held several workshops with other members and the men have begun to take on board that we are also participating and that we need equality at the leadership level. This change made the men more aware," she says.

Other unions have also begun to understand the need to include women and have tried to strengthen women's commissions, departments and secretariats, developed strategies to include gender issues on the trade union agenda and encouraged women to become trade union leaders. However, there is a lack of practical action to obtain results and in many cases change has not taken place.

Francia Sosa

FENATRAMIM
Dominican Republic

"There has been progress in trade unions and many women are now trade union leaders. In addition to women presidents and general secretaries, there are also women on the executive committees."



Nair Goulart

CNTM- FORÇA
SINDICAL Brazil

"I think there is greater participation. I think there are more women occupying leadership roles in trade unions, not only in Brazil, but also in other Latin American countries. Change has been slow but significant and we must highlight these changes because of the example they provide."



two of whom are women. The union says it must make women understand the importance of their participation in the union, but social circumstances prevent participation. Women are shouldered with many responsibilities, mainly in their homes, which prevents them from participating in trade union meetings.

Chile is another country in this category. The Federation of Copper Workers has approximately 700 women members out of more than 13,000 members. Two of the 15 members of the National Council are women. The federation has a women's department, as does the National Confederation of Metalworkers' Federations and Trade Unions (CONSTRAMET), which created the Women's Front (Frente de la Mujer).

The Miners' Association (Asociación Obrera Minera) in Argentina has very few women members. The union says that many more women work in the industry but they are reluctant to join the union despite efforts to organise them. Women occupy some posts in the unions but these are posts that have no decision-making power. They are posts on the council or in the secretariat.

CHALLENGES

Union attitudes to improving women's participation and the difficulties faced by women workers in the metalworking industry show that there have been different degrees of cultural change in Latin America. In general, gender equality within trade unions is not high enough on the agenda and the prevailing culture does not encourage women to join trade unions in most Latin American countries.

Although there is a lot of information available on this issue, what is lacking is the development of union strategies to promote equal opportunities and for unions to really tackle the issue of recruiting women members. This is a long-term process because of the need to fight different aspects of the culture in each country and the mentalities and social history that so often act as a barrier to progress.

According to women in trade unions in Latin America, IMF support is fundamental. The IMF organises programmes, projects and workshops that contribute to promoting gender equity and cultural change in most of the region's countries.

Nair Goulart says, "it is important to continue the work that the IMF is doing, especially training both men and women to promote action on participation on all fronts." She adds that, "it was important to change the IMF's statutes but this alone will not promote change. The main thing that needs to change is at the grassroots of the unions. There is a need for recruitment campaigns and activities in which women feel included and that take place at appropriate times. The unions must take on this struggle together and include issues like maternity rights and family protection on the collective bargaining agenda so that women can work in peace."

In the light of cultural changes within the trade unions in Latin America, former IMF regional director Jorge Campos says that, "there is still a lot of work to do. We have to eliminate this taboo that many comrades have about women's participation in trade union activities. When I refer to men, I am referring to the husbands, brothers, sons, colleagues and leaders. In addition, there are other challenges that we must overcome, such as violations of the right to freedom of association, the intolerance shown by many employers towards trade union leaders and the criminalisation of trade union activity."

Latin America has reached a crucial moment in the fight to reduce gender inequalities. There have been important political, social and economic changes and these are needed to eradicate the poverty and social exclusion to which most women are subjected. Hopefully this trend will reach trade unions throughout Latin America. This challenge requires more training and the reorganisation of activities to benefit all men and women in the trade union world. Unions must rise to the challenge and adapt to the new times, new needs and new trends.

Claudia Vásquez

CONSTRAMET Chile

"There is a change in that we women feel ourselves to be part of society. I think that the IMF has gone deeper into this issue and given us the importance that we now have by encouraging active participation in the leadership."



Emília Valente

CNM-CUT Brazil

"Women are more active in unions now and this has brought some changes, even in the way that men talk. That might not seem important, but the fact that men now say "ladies and gentlemen" when making speeches at union assemblies indicates a change."

