

Report of Panel Discussion: **Women and Casualisation**

1 October 2003

Albufeira, Portugal

Introduction

Immediately before the 19th General Conference of the International Federation of Workers' Education Associations, affiliates and guests of IFWEA had the opportunity to participate in a seminar to discuss the growth in informal and casual work, particularly relating to women, and how the workers' education movement could respond.

The seminar was attended by 36 delegates from workers' education organisations and NGOs from Africa, North and South America, Asia and Europe + three invited guests.

The event was organised by IFWEA and Women Working Worldwide, together with Arbetarnas Bildningsförbund – Sweden, Arbeidernes Opplysningsforbund – Norway, and the UGT-Portugal. The organisers also acknowledge the financial support of the Olof Palme International Centre.

The seminar was opened by Leonor Santos of UGT Portugal, who welcomed participants on behalf of UGT and IFWEA and stated that the theme of seminar was casual work and other problems arising in the path to equal rights. The first speaker would be Angela Hale of Women Working Worldwide, followed by presentations from speakers from Europe, the Philippines, Peru, the USA and Jordan.

The chair, Sahra Ryklief, then introduced **Angela Hale of Women Working Worldwide** to give a short introductory presentation.

Angela began by clarifying what was meant by “gender and casualisation”, a process affecting both men and women but with a clear gender dimension. Everyone attending would know what that meant: more and more people working without proper contracts, with irregular hours and associated lack of legal protection, and the difficulties of organising themselves.

“Casualisation is not a new phenomenon. In some countries such as India, the majority of workers, especially women, have always worked in the informal economy, but even in India it is increasing, and worldwide it is increasing at a rate of five per cent every year.

*“Globalisation is increasing and accelerating the process of casualisation. One of the ironies of globalisation is that people talk about integration – of production, finance, marketing – but for many workers the reality is **disintegration**: loss of regular sources of livelihood, loss of a coherent identity, loss of belonging to an established workforce.”*

Women Working Worldwide had recently completed a research project with organisations in nine countries in Asia and Europe on sub-contracting in the clothing industry. In all cases they found an increasing use of casual and contract labour and outsourcing to unregulated workplaces. Some interesting hierarchies were emerging, with workers taking work home and subcontracting it to other casual workers. This had led to massive problems for organising. The research revealed that in fact employers were deliberately using this method to avoid organisation, undermine collective bargaining processes and informalise labour relations. Angela recognised that there were many other reasons for this, but the important question for the seminar was how to respond to the situation.

The gender dimension was essential in understanding the problems. Many more women than men were in informal work, and attitudes still held that it was not as important for women to have regular work, but the hours women worked were determined by employers’ requirements, not the need of women to have flexible conditions because of family commitments.

As men become increasingly affected by informalisation of their work, Angela noted, women could say “Now you know what it feels like”, and that if male trade unionists had paid more attention to the needs of casual women workers they might have been more prepared to tackle the problems.

Angela ended by suggesting that the focus of the seminar should be to raise awareness of the issues, in two different ways:

- 1 how these issues can be more highlighted to ensure a gender dimension
- 2 how to reach informalised workers when they do not have regular employment.

Europe

Anneke van Luijken from IRENE talked about the situation in Europe, including eastern Europe. She noted that the problems in Europe had not been addressed previously, as the emphasis had usually been on differences between north and south, and Europe was seen as a very rich region of the world. However, that was now changing and more activity was now being undertaken in Europe. For example, FNV had organised a conference in the Netherlands in January 2003 on organising in the informal economy.

She asked the questions: “What do we do with workers’ education? What action does it lead to? Our final aim is to improve conditions for workers in the informal economy. One of our biggest successes has been the ILO Convention on Home Work, now signed by four countries, and it is essential to campaign for its retention.”

Anneke agreed with Angela that there was a difference between what was happening to men and women. More men were becoming self-employed, but women were becoming more marginalised. Women as sole wage earners were having great difficulty in finding suitable work in order to feed their families.

Europe now had huge numbers of undocumented workers, from eastern Europe, Africa and South America, all needing to work. There was a growing layer of unprotected workers: in families, in agriculture and in factories. For example, in Italy 1.2 million families had a home help living in the house, the majority of whom had no formal status.

Anneke noted that one of the important lessons learned from the seminar held in January 2003 was that many unions see that they have to organise these very weak workers but they do not know how to do it. The unions have to change the rules of their own organisations to organised self-employed and informal economy workers. They know that if the protection of workers is not more inclusive they will only speak for some workers. Trade unions and NGOs need an organising agenda. The Self-Employed Women’s Union in Africa set up a new trade union, and others would have to follow.

Anneke ended by stressing that the essential role of education with IFWEA and other organisations was to make the poorest workers visible and to achieve protection for these marginalised workers.

The next speaker was **Mylene Hega**, General Secretary of MAKALAYA, an organisation in the Philippines of women mainly from trade unions, established in 1998 as a challenge to trade unions to be more receptive to women’s needs.

Mylene gave an illuminating account of the conditions faced by workers in the Philippines, especially women. “Contractualisation” was now making up a massive percentage of the workforce and was growing year by year. She gave some astonishing statistics which highlighted just how far companies in the Philippines had gone down the path of casualising the workforce.

Increases in the level of employment in the category of own-account workers was a sign of deteriorating quality of employment in the country.

A five-year study undertaken by the Department of Labour and Employment (1988-2002) showed that part-time workers accounted for more than a third of total employment, and this figure increased by an annual average of 6.1 per cent within that time.

Contractualisation was being used increasingly by employers to underwrite the cheapness and flexibility of men and women in the formal employment sector. The most common measures used by firms in the Philippines to promote employment flexibility included:

- substitution of permanent workers with temporary or casual labour
- a greater use of women and migrant workers
- subcontracting components of production previously manufactured within the firm’s plant
- subcontracting services (for example, transport, packaging, security, maintenance) performed within the physical location of the company.

Mylene highlighted the many ways that contractualisation could be hidden behind different names and terms: for example, a worker could be classified as a trainee, helper, apprentice, piece-rate worker, casual, seasonal or daily paid. Contractual workers could be hired through direct hiring, agency hiring or through cooperatives.

Job contracting and agency hiring had been used in the Philippines for many years, but their use by the formal sector had become widespread in the 1990s and the government had done nothing to prevent their spread. In fact, in 1997 the Department of Labour and Employment issued Department Order 10, which institutionalised flexible working arrangements. In that year, the number of agencies in the subcontracting business increased by a massive 45 per cent.

Another survey undertaken by the Department of Labour revealed that between 1992 and 1997 overall employment in the formal economy grew by 14 per cent, while the number of contractual workers soared by 60 per cent, while the number of temporary workers outside reached 59 per cent.

Mylene gave more examples of how contractualisation has affected women workers in the Philippines: in the tuna canning export industry, 95 per cent of workers are either casual or contracted, and 85 per cent of the workforce is female. When orders are high, workers are forced to work overtime of twelve-hour days, and when demand is low they work fewer hours. Working conditions are controlled very tightly (for example, workers are not allowed to speak to each other during working hours, they

are not provided with drinking water, they do not receive sick pay or holiday pay), and wages are very low.

In the manufacturing and services sector, it is estimated that as many as 80 per cent of all workers in the production of garments and electronic parts in special economic zones are women.

Mylene ended by saying:

“Contractualisation has affected women very badly in the past two decades. More and more women are moving into the employment market in conditions where employment relationships are becoming ever more flexible and precarious. While emerging sectors are dominated by the employment of women (such as in the EPZs, migrant work and the informal economy), working conditions in these sectors are characterised by increased insecurity, increased intensity of work, increased cases of violence and sexual harassment towards women, increased health and safety risks and increased disregard for family responsibilities.

“We have to look at the relationship between workers and patriarchy. It is important to look at the patriarchal culture of trade unions. Women’s issues are relegated to women alone and are not seen as trade union issues. The challenge we are making is not only to the trade union movement in the Philippines but also to women.”

Peru: Piera Carreras, Programa Laboral de Desarrollo (PLADES)

Piera began her presentation with some statistics from Latin America, particularly Peru. Women’s participation in the labour market is 44.7 per cent, and women’s unemployment stands at 11.2 per cent. Women earn 36 per cent less than men overall (25 per cent in the formal sector and 48 per cent in the informal economy).

Informal economy work in these countries is in agriculture and therefore seasonal. The main areas of agro-industrial production are asparagus, fresh flowers, fruits, grapes for the wine industry and potatoes. Other sectors employing large numbers of casual workers are fisheries and jewellery.

The informal economy in Latin America had been growing since the 1990s, and more women than men were employed as casual or informal workers. In some countries there is as yet no legislation covering the rights of workers in the informal economy, and they have no access to social security.

Women are recruited into casual employment either directly by the employer or indirectly by a service enterprise or by an individual. They usually belong to the lowest economic level of society and are poorly educated: again, the most vulnerable members of society. A quarter of them are heads of family, and they sometimes have to enlist the help of their children to enable them to achieve something approaching a living wage.

Piera reiterated what earlier speakers had said: conditions for women in the informal economy are characterised by long working days, poor health and safety, low pay and exposure to sexual harassment. She agreed that trade unions and labour organisations have to change their practices and make more effort to help these workers.

USA: Susan Schurman, George Meany Center for Labor Studies

Susan began her presentation by describing the George Meany Center and its work and went on to talk about the process of deregulation, informalisation and disorganisation of labour. She believed it was important for workers' organisation around the world to develop a shared analysis of the pattern of the global economy.

She was very struck by the previous speakers' comments about the pattern of work that is growing in the casual economy. There was a change in global capital, driven by the desire to escape regulation.

In the United States they have begun to understand that much of what they see as the strategy of capital around the world is the dismantling of organisation built by capital in the 20th century. Then, the conditions were suitable for organised labour. The structure of the trade unions was based on bureaucratic organisation, and it worked very well in the formal economy.

Meanwhile, however, capital had been changing its form: subcontracting, outsourcing and so on. It is continually searching all over the world for unregulated labour markets. At the same time, workers' organisations are moribund. The process of joining or forming a union in the USA is the most difficult in any of the western industrial democracies. Only approximately 14 per cent of US workers are union members. In the private sector, union membership has fallen to about 9 per cent. Unions are therefore not regarded as serious workers' organisations. The paradox in the USA is that it has the largest union membership in the world but it is the weakest structurally.

Trade unions in the USA have been losing the battle to protect the organised labour force because of the informal economy. This is very closely linked to immigration and the problem of "undocumented" migrants. They either come alone or are being trafficked, and there is no record of how many there are. This creates huge conflicts within the US workforce.

Until 1995 there was a brief time when Americans became very hospitable towards immigrants. The AFL-CIO adopted a policy of support for informal, undocumented labour, which was controversial and became more unpopular among the rank and file.

Fifty-five per cent of all new workers who were organised into unions between 1995 and 2003 were women, the majority being African-American women, but at the same time American women in general are very sceptical about unions. They believe that unions do not understand women's issues, and women find it very difficult to get elected.

A variety of different mechanisms were being explored: a number of organisations had been created, connected to the AFL-CIO, supported by the AFL-CIO, to organise in minority communities. They had become “substitutionalist”, but it was an important step.

Susan, in common with the earlier speakers, stressed that trade unions have to change their understanding of who they represent; they have to become serious about the idea that they represent all workers. Labour in the USA and Canada is becoming casualised, and migrant workers make up the vast majority of casual workers.

The movement must learn again the skills of strategic campaigning. It will be a very slow process: the USA has a very conservative labour movement and a very conservative people.

Jordan: Roba Bashir, ACHRS

The last presentation was from Roba Bashir on the employment of women in Jordan.

In contrast to the previous presentations, the picture of women’s employment in Jordan was of very low participation in the workforce. The Department of Statistics reported that in 2001 only 11.9 per cent of the female population aged 15 and over was economically active and willing to participate in the workforce. Of those economically active women, 20.3 per cent were unemployed. The majority of the women outside the workforce were either students or housewives, mostly over 25 years old, who had chosen to stay out of the workforce or were active in the informal economy.

Although in recent decades Jordan had made steady progress in terms of enhancing women’s status and education, traditional attitudes still saw the woman’s role as primarily domestic. These attitudes, together with discriminatory hiring practices and the absence of government policy promoting female employment, were major reasons cited in explaining the continued under-representation of women in the labour force.

Following the presentations, Sahra Ryklief summarised by saying that there has been a de-formalisation, informalisation and deregulation of the workforce all over the world. Due to lack of formal status, people accept very bad working conditions, and women bear the brunt of these conditions.

New forms of workers are being created, new roles for trade unions and new roles for educators. There was a need to add a new, organising agenda to IFWEA’s traditional activities of research and education, and specifically:

- To challenge patriarchal roles in society and in trade unions
- To challenge the institutionalisation of trade unions: they have a broader responsibility to labour as a whole
- To make informal and casual workers more visible within the labour movement and within society
- To work up and down the production chain globally to help those people suffering at the bottom.

The seminar then formed into small groups and spent a short time discussing what they thought the role of IFWEA should be in tackling these priorities.

What can we do within IFWEA?

Ighsaan Schroeder (Khanya College, South Africa) reported that his group had picked up on one particular point: in the plenary discussions the point had been made very strongly that the traditional labour movement was not organising casual workers. Women are suspicious or sceptical, but it does not mean that women are not organised.

IFWEA's affiliates are either formally linked to the formal labour movement or strongly orientated towards it, which means that IFWEA is as distant as the labour movement from informal economy workers. He asked:

- whether IFWEA should continue to orientate towards the formal labour movement if informal economy workers are not interested in the formal labour movement
- whether IFWEA should continue to offer only education or become involved in campaigns

Martin Jansen (Workers' Radio Project, South Africa) commented that the content of the presentation had been very impressive and could form part of IFWEA's activities for the coming period. The strength of IFWEA lay in its mix of organisations: a number of strong trade unions, but also NGOs, and because of that he felt that there could be a valuable exchange of perspectives. IFWEA could act as a bridge between unions and NGOs.

Traditional unions were not succeeding in bringing informal economy workers (especially women) into the labour movement, and there was a need for research as to why this was the case.

Kastriot Muço, President of the Confederation of Trade Unions of Albania, commented that the visibility of women was very important to emphasise, because in his experience there was often a strong self-discrimination by women to become leaders. Women had to accept their responsibilities and fight for their rights.

Manuela Garrido, (UGT-Portugal Women's Section) reported that IFWEA could look at education, training, organisation, women's roles in trade unions. The higher the qualifications, the better weapons women would have. Women's issues have not been seen as a priority for trade unions.

She also proposed that IFWEA gather data on how many women are involved in casual work.

Jamalat Abu Yusef, (Palestinian Working Women's Association) expressed the hope that the IFWEA General Conference would continue the campaign for casual and informal economy workers. She proposed that IFWEA could act as a bridge

between trade unions and NGOs to coordinate this work. The Association also suggested national and international campaigns to increase the visibility of casual and informal workers, and suggested that IFWEA:

- undertake research to gather concrete data
- hold conferences at a regional level
- put pressure on international companies
- create a network within IFWEA for women
- work with the ICFTU to implement and enforce ILO Conventions

In response to the reports back, Anneke van Luijken warned that they should not be too optimistic, as it was sometimes very difficult to reach out to women working in the informal economy. It was important to challenge other organisations to take on some of this work and create networks.

Regarding research to obtain data, she argued that it was not necessary to wait for figures to begin work.

Angela Hale drew attention to an initiative already under way between Women Working Worldwide and IFWEA on international supply chains, focusing on garments from Asia and fresh produce from Africa. The project's aims were to build networks and organise by using the supply chains, and to produce materials for educational use in Europe.

To conclude the morning's work, Sahra Ryklief reiterated the role of IFWEA as a labour education and research organisation. Building links was the beginning of the process, and this should be integrated into the proceedings of the IFWEA General Conference.