



Our future, our union – IndustriALL Women’s Conference calls for a transformative agenda

IndustriALL Women Conference Report

On 18-19 November 2019, 205 women trade unionists from 60 countries met in Geneva at the IndustriALL World Women’s Conference.



The conference aimed at developing a transformative agenda for our unions that identifies the steps for a deep-seated change in power relations, structures and cultures, to remove the underlying causes that result in the inequalities that women continue to experience in trade unions and the world of work more generally.

During the conference, the participants took stock of the situation of gender equality in our unions and explored how to transform trade union structures, cultures and practices.

Participants recognised that this transformation is necessary not only to fight against gender inequality, but much more fundamentally to ensure the survival of our organizations in a rapidly changing world of work.

The recommendations that came out of the conference lay the foundations for a broader transformation of our unions towards more democracy, equality, inclusion and diversity.

Unions must be agents of change:

At the conference, women called on their unions to practice what they preach in terms of the fight for equality, calling for concrete and genuine action for gender equality and social progress, and actions to fight the stereotypes and social norms that perpetuate discrimination and domination against women.



“We trade unions should be the structures that advance gender equality not only in words but in deeds. We should show the practical example. We say something, we do it. We should not be silent about discrimination anywhere. At home, at work. Anywhere. Trade unions should speak out.”, Natalya LEVYTSKA, Independent Trade Union of Miners of Ukraine – KVPU, Ukraine

Other speakers said that trade unions must be inclusive structures, reflecting diversity, not only in terms of gender but also in terms of colour, age, gender identity and sexual orientation. Unions must be safe spaces where everyone's opinion must be listened to, respected and valued and not only looked at through the lens of the person's gender.

“Ideally, we would have spaces in our unions where everyone’s opinion is valued and where there is a real willingness and openness to learn from each other.”, Ana FENDLEY, Workers Uniting North America, USA



This diversity must be reflected at all levels of our structures and a gender perspective must be integrated in all trade union action, in order to respond to the different needs of all the workers.

Women must feel represented and protected by their unions. Diverse and more inclusive and respectful decision-making bodies and leadership will allow women to better identify with their union and see themselves reflected.

Transparent election processes that give women a real chance to gain access to decision-making positions are fundamental to achieving real inclusiveness in union structures.

The importance of unions for women and the progress made

Many good practices were presented at the conference that illustrated the progress made by many unions in the areas of:

- Organizing women
- Protecting the rights of women workers and improving their working conditions through collective bargaining
- Women's leadership
- Representation and participation of young women

You can find some of these good practices illustrated in a video [HERE](#).

Testimonies by several participants underscored the positive impact that participating in a union can have on women's lives. They spoke of "a before and an after", of a break with their past, of a transformation which has allowed them today to assert themselves, to progress and to fight for their rights and women's rights in general.



"I have been a trade union leader for seven years. I was a victim of violence. I was locked up at home. But for seven years, I have played an active role in the union. It has meant an enormous growth and knowledge for me, and today I am able to stand up for myself in front of anyone to defend not only my rights, but also the rights of my sisters", Ana Maria MILLACARES, Confederación Nacional de Trabajadores Metalúrgicos – CONSTRAMET, Chile

But for many participants, actively participating in their trade union has not been easy.

Male dominated organizations:

Becoming a woman union leader today in IndustriALL's sectors is still an ordeal, beyond that faced by men. Once women do manage to occupy leadership positions, they continue to face several forms of conscious and unconscious discrimination.

Again and again, the participants, and in particular the young participants, mentioned the isolation they felt in their unions, often being a small minority of women or the only woman in a male environment. They complained that their views and ideas are questioned or ignored because they are women. Women still have to work harder and for longer to show that they are as good and as competent as their fellow male unionists. This is all the truer for women leaders who also have to face challenges to their legitimacy as leaders.



“I am the third oldest person in the executive committee [of my union] and I still have this feeling that everything I say is viewed through the lens of me being a woman.” Laura Hagan, IUE-CWA, United States:

Several participants expressed their difficulty in convincing their male colleagues during collective bargaining to keep demands related to advancement of women rights and equality on the negotiation table. These demands are frequently the first to be dropped in collective bargaining.

Unions themselves are also not free from violence and harassment. Many women spoke of the harassment they have faced in their trade union experience.

“If, as trade unions, we want women to feel included, we need to change the way we communicate. If we want women to feel that we represent them, we must defend their cause. [...] Women are the future of trade unions.” Sabri SCHUMACHER, SYNA, Switzerland



For too long the expectation has been that women must adapt themselves to union structures and values that have been designed by men for men. It is clear today, and conference participants repeated it over and over again, that it is our structures that must be transformed and adapted to suit women, not the other way around.

Changing the mind-set by engaging men:

Several participants reported that their unions have developed more inclusive structures and defined the fight for equality as a priority. Yet often these institutional changes have produced limited results in terms of representation and effective participation of women. This points to a resistance to change within our

structures, rooted in mind-sets. Achieving gender equality in trade unions will require these mind-sets to be challenged, particularly those of male trade unionists.

Men are the majority of members and leaders in our organizations so their commitment is essential for these transformations to be effective.



“The unions have to recognize the structural differences men and women have to face in life, at work, in pay and opportunity. We have to educate all our work mates, especially the men. Women already know about these differences. We live with them every day of our lives, and this is not an issue for women to solve by ourselves.”, Anna Fernebro, Industrifacket Metall - IF Metall, Sweden:

Men must be made aware of the conscious or unconscious discrimination that women face in unions, as well as the causes of this discrimination, which are often rooted in unequal power relations between men and women, as well as in social and cultural norms.

Participants emphasised that the fight for equality is not an issue to be dealt with by women alone, it must be a priority for unions. Gender equality committees or similar platforms that include women as well as men can play an important role.

A call was made during the conference to open more spaces in our unions for developing new concepts of masculinity and to develop feminist activism among male unionists through awareness raising and training programs.



“We need to make sure that we build capacity to develop male feminists. We do not have any other choice than to conscientize our men, to develop capacity of male feminism in order to ensure that they walk with us along this journey, side by side, and to ensure that we equally occupy these spaces for us in all platforms, in trade unions and confederations.”, Bonita LOUBSER, SACTWU, South Africa:

The commitment of all is needed if we want trade unions to be able to change attitudes and behaviours and fight stereotypes against women.

It is important to raise awareness among men in unions, and especially male leaders, of the absolute necessity for unions to become more inclusive. The risk, if they do not, is that unions will become increasingly unrepresentative of an evolving, more feminized and younger workforce, with dramatic consequences for membership numbers. Inclusion and diversity means accepting renewal within decision-making bodies and leadership positions, giving more space to women and young people.

➤ **Reinforcing the capacities and confidence of women in trade unions:**

Training remains fundamental to women’s active participation in trade unions. The main role of training and education is to show women that they have an active and legitimate part to play in our unions. The patriarchal system affects everyone’s vision, behaviour and beliefs. Many participants reported cases of women preferring to elect men in leadership rather than women, or of women questioning women’s leadership or otherwise making it difficult for their female colleagues to advance in the union.



“The problem with patriarchy is that it is an entire system which is against female leadership. This is not the fault of the women if we have women who do not want to be represented by women. This is the system that has taught that to the women.”, Hidanora PEREZ CAMPUZANO, SINTRACARBON, Colombia

Participants emphasized that union training can help to build women’s self-confidence and to convince them that they too have a lot to contribute to unions, and above all that they are capable of it.

However, a perceived need for training and capacity-building should not be used, as is often the case, as an excuse for delaying a more active participation of women in their union, nor for justifying the lack of women leaders.

“Of course we [women] need training and capacity building but how many years and how much more capacity building do we need? Our brothers, don’t they need this awareness and training? This is the question.”, Nazma AKTER, Sommilito Garments Sramik Federation – SGSF, Bangladesh:



➤ **Eradicate gender-based violence (GBV):**

We cannot talk about equality in the world of work or in our unions as long as women face violence and harassment.

We heard at the conference poignant testimonies by women unionists who suffered from domestic violence, physical attack and torture because of their union role, or sexual harassment in their unions.

All these forms of violence are the results of unequal power relations between women and men in our societies, industries and unions.

The women at the conference made a unanimous call to stop violence and harassment against women. They adopted a resolution calling on IndustriALL to launch a campaign and mobilize its affiliates to promote and ratify ILO Convention 190 (C190) on the elimination of violence and harassment in the workplace, adopted in June 2019. This resolution was endorsed by the IndustriALL Executive Committee a few days later.

“This new instrument, for the first time, gives an opportunity to shape a future of work which is based on dignity, respect and equality in the world of work and free of VH, including GBV [...] C 190 is a robust, ground-breaking, progressive instrument and one of the most wide-reaching that ILO has ever adopted.” Maria TSIRANTONAKI, International Trade Union Confederation - ITUC



Campaign materials are available [HERE](#). In particular, a [leaflet](#) was produced to explain the Convention, and illustrate how this new instrument is meaningful and ground-breaking.

The participants at the conference recalled that the fight against violence and harassment is not for women alone to wage. It is everyone's job, and both men and women have their share of responsibility.



“We are training our men, and instead of sitting back, watching and listening and seeing the behaviour happen, we are giving them the skills to stand up in the room and say that it is not OK, and when something happens to intervene. [...] Men are training other men in order for them to say “We can sign the pledge, but we need to do more and take responsibility. It is not only our sisters’ responsibility.”
Dayna SYKES, USW, United States

➤ **Include young women:**

One of the highlights of the Women’s Conference was the vibrant participation of young women.

“We absolutely must prove that the reforms are possible and that we are able to accelerate the change and move forward. We demand respect, you don’t intimidate us! Don’t underestimate us. We are strong. We are super women! We are the world!”, Nassima El Guennouni, FNTE/UMT, Morocco



They reiterated the importance of including young women at all levels, even in leadership. Their presence is vital if unions really want to reflect their perspectives and concerns for today and for tomorrow.

“As young women, we need trade union schools for women because it is the most efficient tool to reach these spaces where we do not have women representation and particularly young women. This education needs to be on-going and needs to cover a range of things so that women can become powerful leaders.” Leticia PAYANO ALCÁNTARA, Federación Nacional de Trabajadores Industriales - FENTI:

The young women called on unions to ensure that women will not pay alone the price of reproduction. The right to maternity protection must be better respected. It is also time to fight for the recognition of parental leave. Wage inequality must also end.

Women, who remain primarily responsible for family care and domestic work, need more time. The use of new technologies should allow a fairer distribution of profit and time, and lead to a reduction in working time.

The young participants called on unions to continue the fight for decent work for young workers, and more particularly women workers. In a transforming world of work, lifelong learning and re-skilling is, and will be, essential for women to adapt to the new requirements of the world of work.

Unions must actively address these concerns, not only for the advancement of social justice, but also to convince young workers of the importance of joining unions. Trade unions must establish and implement affirmative policies in favour of an active participation of young people at all levels of union structures. They should also adapt themselves to young workers' way of communicating and taking action.

➤ **The crucial importance of women's representation in union leadership:**

“It will be difficult for men to create space for us. How do we [women] take opportunities? How do we maximize those opportunities? How to leverage the smallest opportunities available? Nobody hands over it to you, unless you take it. We need to lobby. We need to network with women. We need to inspire ourselves. Nobody will hand it over on silver platter to you. Whatever training you have, whatever we have in the constitution, whatever inclusion and diversity policy we have! let's take action! It is time to take action.”
Vida BREWU, Ghana Mine Workers' Union – GMWU, Ghana



One of the obstacles to the inclusion of women in union leadership is the lack of female role models. Women workers cannot identify with organizations with an aging leadership team, made up mostly of men. Women leaders need to be made more visible in order to attract more workers to the union, and their presence in the media, particularly in social media, is key.

Showing that women are in decision making bodies and leadership sends a strong message to other women: “Yes, it is possible!”

Participants also called for a more inclusive and respectful leadership style in our unions. Two values appear crucial: solidarity and mentoring.

Women leaders at the conference stressed the importance of training and bequeathing institutional and professional knowledge to younger women in order to allow them to progress in the union.

“When you are a leader, you will not be around for ever. I believe it is important we nurture others; we need to be a mentor. We have to be there to help others, we have to show them the way.”,
Jane RAGOO, Confédération des Travailleurs des Secteurs Publique et Privé – CTSP, Mauritius



Participants spoke of the continuing need for quotas or targets to guarantee the participation of women in leadership structures, and several leaders at the conference pointed out that they would not be where they are today if quotas had not forced male leaders to give their seats to women.

Potential women leaders need to be identified and encouraged. Transparency in electoral processes is essential to the election of women leaders. Too often, the selection of candidates takes place in informal discussion spaces where women are not present.

➤ **The role of women's structures:**

Separate union structures for women are still needed as safe spaces where women can develop their ideas and confidence away from male judgement, as well as find support for their personal struggles in the union and experiences such as violence and harassment.

Men have developed their own modes of socialization and networking which play a key role in decision-making. Women are often excluded from these spaces consciously or unconsciously. The creation of spaces exclusively for women also gives women unionists the opportunity to network and socialize.

But the presence of women's structures is not a reason for union decision-making bodies not to debate and decide on issues faced by women. Promotion of gender equality is not the sole responsibility of women's structures, but of everyone in the union.

➤ **Respond to women workers' concerns and defend their rights:**

Wage inequality, sexism and discrimination, non-respect of maternity protection, parental leave, flexible hours and work/life balance, violence and harassment, adaptation of work equipment to fit women, installation of sanitary facilities and changing rooms for women: All these must become union priorities and be included in collective bargaining demands.



“Let’s be involved in issues discussed by tripartite council’s meetings when where our concerns will be taken with the government. If we are silent, no one will talk on our behalf. The issues will be under the carpet.”, Yuyi SIKANANU, National Union of Building, Engineering & General Workers - NUBEGW, Zambia

➤ **Make the future of work an opportunity for women**

The arrival of new technologies and the transformations in our workplaces have a differential impact on women and on men.

These transformations could represent a great opportunity to reduce gender inequalities in the world of work: access of women to jobs that previously required physical strength, greater flexibility in working hours. However, if the roots of gender inequalities and the current biases leading to discrimination against women are not addressed, Industry 4.0 will become a new trap for women who will see their situation in the world of work worsen.

“Industry 4.0 must be on the agenda, especially when it affects women. We need to talk about training. [...] We need to be part of the discussion around Industry 4.0 and we need to be present for us, especially women, so we can make the difference.”, Christine OLIVIER, National Union of Metalworkers of South Africa – NUMSA, South Africa



See [HERE](#), Fanja Rasolomanana's presentation: *Industry 4.0: Impacts on women at work in our industries and ways that unions can address them*

The limited presence of women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) jobs is a significant obstacle to women being able to benefit from the employment opportunities of Industry 4.0. Unions can help reverse this trend. Many women leave STEM jobs because of the sexism they encounter as well as the lack of recognition of their competencies. The lack of flexible working time and finding a work life balance are also obstacles to women staying in STEM careers. Protecting and defending the rights of women in STEM should become a priority for unions.

See [HERE](#): Lina Andersson from Unionen 's presentation: *Women in STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths): The role of unions in addressing current and future challenges*

Moving forward the transformative agenda through IndustriALL action

Looking forward to the IndustriALL Congress in October, participants unanimously adopted a [resolution](#) demanding that IndustriALL's Action Plan for 2020-2024 integrates gender equality, diversity and the advancement of women rights into all its activities and actions. Women's Conference recommendations are for IndustriALL to work with its affiliates in developing a transformative agenda that will enable them to adapt to a changing world of work. Women are part of these ongoing transformations and will be impacted differently from men. Women must therefore be part of trade union decision-making and actions to address these challenges.

Trade unions have to adapt and be inclusive, and IndustriALL should set an example. That's why participants supported continued efforts to increase women's participation and representation at all levels of IndustriALL.



"I am certain that IndustriALL faces significant challenges at its Congress: We need to put a younger and more feminine face on our organisation [...] We need to discuss what kind of trade union of the future we want. Because the model that we currently have is aged and doesn't address our needs", Lucineide VARJÃO SOARES, Confederação Nacional dos Ramos Químicos da Central Unica dos Trab. - CNQ/CUT