

Raising our Voices:

Empowering women
across the global south

A series of case studies of
women trade unionists

“ Whatever women do
they must do twice
as well as men to
be thought half as
good. Luckily, this is
not difficult. ”

– Charlotte Whitton

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Introduction

The TUC is committed to supporting people around the world in their struggle to achieve decent healthcare, education, employment, freedom from persecution and discrimination and the right to a say in how they are governed. These development issues are an integral and historic part of the trade union movement's commitment to global solidarity.

The TUC also works hand in hand with trade unions around the world by acting in political solidarity, defending trade unions rights and mobilising, often at short notice, when there is a direct threat against a union or a trade unionist anywhere in the world.

By raising significant funds through appeals the TUC also expresses practical solidarity with working people in the wake of natural disasters or armed conflict, most recently for the people of Haiti after the devastating earthquakes.

Much of the development work that the TUC and affiliated unions carry out in the global south inevitably has a focus on women because whether they are in paid work or not, women make up an ever growing majority of the world's poor.

As such, the TUC is proud to give voice to these inspiring women trade unionists and is proud to be working in partnership with trade unions to increase the rights of workers and to reduce poverty across the global south.

Hariyatu Bangura

Hariyatu is the Women's Leader in the Western Region of the Sierra Leone Teachers' Union (SLTU). The National Union of Teachers (NUT) has a longstanding partnership with the SLTU and with the TUC recently visited Freetown to help to build upon that partnership.

Hariyatu is a business studies teacher at the Sierra Leone Muslim Congress Secondary School in Kissy Mess Mess in Freetown. She joined the union as soon as she started as a teacher and got increasingly involved. She says, "Now that I am active, I can start to support other women and encourage them to be active. Some women just sit at the back of meetings, but I tell them to move to the front and play a role. Women cannot just be passengers; they must be a driver sometimes too."

Hariyatu recognises that it is hard for women to be involved in union structures. "Women have traditionally been marginalised by men and when we go for leadership positions in the union it can sometimes threaten men, but this does need to happen," she says.

She believes that there is a real need to train more girls to become both teachers and active members of the union. "Forty per cent of the union membership are women, but women hold very few of the union leadership positions. This needs to change, but women

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face many challenges. We have to juggle our domestic lives with our union and school responsibilities. Before I arrived in school this morning, I had already done my family's laundry and I had prepared some soup for our evening meal."

The future work of the NUT with the SLTU will aim to improve both the lot of teachers in Sierra Leone and the quality of education that children in school receive.

Hashmeya Muhsin

“Iraqi workers need a fair and just labour law.”

In Iraq, Saddam Hussein’s unjust anti-union laws continue to be enforced. Hashmeya Muhsin, President of the Electricity Workers’ Union in Basra, is a key part of the national campaign to introduce a new labour code which will give improved rights to trade unions and their members.

The TUC is proud to be supporting Hashmeya and the Iraqi labour campaign for fair and just labour laws.

Hashmeya was elected President of the Electricity Workers’ Union in Basra in 2003, becoming the first woman to head a national trade union in Iraq and one of the very few in the Arabic-speaking world. In the face of great personal risk, she continues to work as a tireless advocate for all working Iraqis, currently spear-heading a national social security campaign and she is a key leader in the campaign for a fair and just labour law.

She is also the technical director of the Basra electricity plant, vice president of the General Federation of Iraqi Workers, and an executive committee member of ICEM, the global union federation covering energy workers, amongst others.

“We shall carry on with the task of rallying workers for just and fair labour laws and we shall not hesitate to take action that could help the success of this just national cause.”



Photo credit: © ICEM

Hashmeya embodies active trade unionism in this southern region of Iraq, where insecurity continues to put trade unionists at day-to-day risk.

Previously, Hashmeya led a successful campaign for a fairer salary system for her members in 2008, overturning the previous decree from the first post-invasion US administration. She has also secured full-time work for thousands of unemployed Iraqis, permanent jobs for temporary and contract workers and allowances for workers performing dangerous duties.

Hashmeya said, “We shall carry on with the task of rallying workers for just and fair labour laws and we shall not hesitate to take action that could help the success of this just national cause.”

To sign the Iraqi labour campaign appeal visit:
www.iraqitradeunions.org

Gabriella Memberr

Gabriella Memberr is a civil servant and a member of the Non Academic Staff Union (NASU) in Nigeria. Gabriella participated in HIV/AIDS training as part of the Nigeria Labour Congress and TUC project.

The project's aims are to contribute to a drop in the prevalence of HIV/AIDS, to protect better the employment and human rights of workers infected with or affected by HIV/AIDS, and to eliminate discrimination against them in the education and health sectors in Nigeria. At the end of each training programme, participants develop action plans to enable them to transfer knowledge to the workplace. Gabriella did just this, and on returning to work she conducted HIV/AIDS training for her colleagues at two workplaces. This was a key opportunity for workers to understand the issues about HIV/AIDS and the need to access voluntary counselling and confidential testing. One of the participants of her training said, "This is the first time a programme of this nature is being organised in this office. We are happy because we are better informed about HIV/AIDS issues and can make informed decisions."

Before Gabriella's training course, workers did not understand HIV/AIDS issues and their rights. Issues of stigma and discrimination were discussed in depth and challenged. Gabriella wanted participants to understand their rights and so facilitated discussions on workplace policy and the current anti-discrimination bill passing through the national assembly.



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Gabriella said, "The veil of ignorance has been taken off me; I feel empowered with this type of information. I am going to discuss openly some of these issues that in my custom and tradition are a taboo. I know it's going to be a challenge but the essence of a training of this nature is to empower one to transcend beyond self-professed prejudice."

Esther Ogunfowora

Esther is Project Co-ordinator for the Nigeria Labour Congress.

The TUC is working with the Nigeria Labour Congress (NLC) on a project designed to increase the capacity of health and education workers to combat HIV/AIDS in the workplace.

Esther, a nurse and midwife with vast experience in trade union organising and HIV/AIDS policy, care and treatment, was recruited as the NLC-TUC project coordinator in July 2009.

Esther believes that the involvement of women in programmes like the NLC-TUC-UK HIV/AIDS project provides them with the opportunity to identify firsthand the key issues and concerns around HIV/AIDS, particularly the way in which HIV/AIDS has challenged gender roles in Nigerian society.

Esther says, “As far as HIV/AIDS is concerned in Nigeria, women have been at the receiving end of the consequences of the pandemic, both in the workplace and the community at large. They are seen as vectors of the virus and often blamed for the spread of the epidemic.”

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However, since the start of the project, women have become empowered by learning basic information about HIV/AIDS and their rights. Esther has seen this education turn into activism with the women passionately supporting the project to ensure its success. They now see ways to address the inequity that makes women particularly vulnerable to HIV/AIDS and the surrounding injustice.

She says, “They show their passion by speaking out on the issues that affect women’s sexual health. They are now ready to debate and challenge, with evidence, any idea that further discriminates against women with regards to HIV/AIDS.”

The NLC is seeing the benefits of empowering women and enhancing their leadership skills and real changes are beginning to be made in their workplaces.

Vimbai Mushongera

“Trade unions are still being targeted by government agents. Workers are being shot if they undertake industrial action.”

Vimbai is the parliament, advocacy and international affairs officer of the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU). The advent of a Government of National Unity in 2009 threw up new challenges for the ZCTU, and in particular created a complex political environment within which to promote workers' rights. As a result, the TUC started a project with the ZCTU to support the launch of a programme of political advocacy in the new environment, focusing on the violation of workers' rights in order to ensure that workers' perspectives take centre stage in parliamentary, development and reconstruction processes.

Vimbai Mushongera visited the UK with Action for Southern Africa (ACTSA) and the TUC in Autumn 2009. During that time she met MPs, trade unionists and activists to discuss the current political situation in Zimbabwe and to learn from trade unionists doing parliamentary advocacy work in this country.

Vimbai found her visit to the UK immensely valuable. “My visit has been full of experiences and I have learnt so much. This will really help to shape my new role and strategically plan the year ahead. I want to re-focus the way in which we communicate our messages and ensure further monitoring of the political scene.”



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A major highlight for Vimbai was visiting the House of Commons and 10 Downing Street. She learnt so much about the democratic processes of the UK, she said. “I told myself that I will go and read more about our parliament and prepare education programmes that will empower all the trade union and community leaders in the same way that I have been empowered.”

Su Su Nway

In 2005, Su Su Nway became the first-ever victim of forced labour in Burma to prosecute the perpetrators successfully. The local officials responsible were jailed for eight months, but Su Su Nway herself was charged with defaming the chairman of the local authority and was sentenced to 18 months.

Pressure from the International Labour Organisation saw her released early. She was arrested again in November 2007 after leading peaceful protests, eventually receiving a reduced sentence of eight and a half years for the offence of damaging the state of “public tranquility”.

From rampant forced labour and child soldiers, to the banning of trade unions and endemic poverty, Burma is one of the worst countries in the world to be a worker. Continuing military repression has created some one million internally displaced people.

Su Su Nway is currently confined in the remote and malarial Hkamti prison, some 1200 miles from her family in Rangoon, who are frequently denied access to her. She suffers from a congenital heart condition and high blood pressure and is denied medical treatment.

Staging regular protests and hunger strikes from prison, Su Su Nway is an inspiration to all who stand against tyranny. She is 35 years old.

“I know I will end up in jail for advocating the truth; however, I want my fellow citizens to continue their struggle selflessly and responsibly toward eradication of forced labour in Burma.”



In 2010, the TUC is working with Amnesty International, who have just made her an international prisoner of conscience, to highlight her plight, demand the release of all political prisoners in Burma and the end of forced labour, and to replace the proposed sham national elections with a genuine road to democracy.

Sarrah Thomas

Sarrah Thomas took part in the training called Trade Union Organisers: Leadership for Women and Trade Union Negotiators run by the Sierra Leone Labour Congress (SLLC) and the TUC and has never looked back; she is now a driving force for women's empowerment within the union.

The SLLC/TUC project has been running since 2006 and the aim of the project is to recruit and retain members in all sectors and to strengthen trade union structures and networks, including the mainstreaming of women in the union.

Sarrah had been involved in the union and the SLLC for 19 years but had been very much on the sidelines. Now, not only has she risen to prominence as the Women's Co-ordinator of the Electricity Employees Union and the Secretary for the Women's Committee of the SLLC, she also mobilises and empowers other women trade unionists.

Thanks to Sarrah a Women's Committee in the Electricity Employees Union was established in February 2009, and she keeps on pushing for more involvement and recognition for women in her union's structures.



“Which other possible development opportunity can labour congress ever have that can surpass this. For me, I think I can never allow myself, never again to be relegated to backstage trade unionism.”

In the workplace, Sarrah is making a real impact, and has now turned her attention to persuading senior staff to join a union. Sarrah is now part of a team within the SLLC that negotiates for better terms and conditions for workers.

The SLLC value her as a committed activist and a real role model to both men and women.

Nedaa Al Zaher

“Now I realise the importance of unions and I have begun to know my rights at my worksite,” said Palestinian factory worker Nedaa Al Zaher, after attending a TUC-supported training session run by the Palestine General Federation of Trade Unions (PGFTU).

Since October 2009 when the workshops started in targeted workplaces across the West Bank, the PGFTU has organised six workshops for 150 workers covering such issues as child labour, solving conflict, gender relations, and organising.

Nedaa has worked at a cosmetics factory since 2005 and before she participated in the workshop, she had not been a member of a trade union and had not been in contact with her workplace representative. The training session Nedaa attended was called ‘Rights and Freedoms’ and after the training she feels that her knowledge and awareness of the International Labour Organisation and important conventions has been boosted – conventions such as the rights to organise and to collectively bargain, and how these relate to her own workplace.

Nedaa expressed her desire to put her knowledge into action in the workplace. “I’m now a member of the union. I will use the new knowledge in my daily life and at the worksite to defend my rights according to the labour codes and collective agreements.



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“My contacts with my employer, my union representative and with my colleagues will change for the positive. Thanks to this PGFTU project supported by the TUC, I have made an important jump in my life.”

Nedaa is one of 45 workers to have joined a trade union since attending the PGFTU training. The training is taking place at targeted workplaces across the West Bank and it covers workers in the agriculture, public services, finance, petrochemicals, textiles and printing sectors.



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