



CSW61: Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work
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Introduction: Gender at Work is a feminist knowledge network which works on building gender equality and culture of inclusion in organizations. In the last 15 years, we have worked with over 100 organizations around the world ranging from trade unions in South Africa to international NGOs and development agencies to a national government right to work program in India. We analyze and organize with internal gender activists to change deep structures of inequality and discriminatory social norms that hold gender inequality in place despite apparent political will, policies and regulations to promote gender equality. Using the Gender at Work Analytical Framework and key principles of Gender Action Learning processes, we have shown that change is possible towards transforming organizations.

The Secretary General's Report on Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work outlines many policies from social protection to reducing women's unpaid care burden, to fair wages and safe working conditions to address obstacles women face in exercising their rights to work. While such policies are necessary they are not enough. Why is that? Because we know that deeply discriminatory norms, structures, practices and ways of working are embedded in formal organizations such as unions and farmer's collectives, and government programs are implemented in gender unequal ways. Power dynamics operating within the culture and foundation of these organizations and systems block women's leadership and prevent them from benefiting from employment opportunities

Trade unions, for example, have proven to be very useful in helping workers to demand fair wages and working conditions. But trade unions the world over are highly patriarchal structures and women's leadership is generally very low in comparison with their numbers as members.

In South Africa, SACCAWU – the South African Commercial Catering and Allied Workers Union- an affiliate of the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) organizes workers in the hospitality, catering, retail, service, tourism, and finance sectors. Here is an example, where there was a national gender coordinator in place as well as a gender policy and maternity leave policies. And yet, the union was failing women.

- In 2005, SACCAWU had a membership of close to 110,000 workers, around 65% of whom were women
- Women made up only 35% of leadership, sexual harassment was rampant, and for those in leadership, participating in meetings was almost impossible because husbands

controlled women's time and would not allow them to attend night meetings, and it was unsafe for women to travel at night

- A key effort was launched in 2005 to change the culture of the union, by going outside the traditional union structure to create new positions of leadership for women through small committees and trying out new approaches of working and then making new rules governing behavior and ways of working. Gender at Work using a gender action learning approach worked with a change team within SACAAWU to move the needle on women's leadership.

In India, Gender at Work, in collaboration with local community and women's groups and allies at high levels of government and the Food Commissioners connected to the Supreme Court, worked with the national right to work program (MNREGA) to expose deeply discriminatory norms in the way the program was implemented which excluded the poorest Dalit women from their right to work and income.

In 2005 in India, after a long struggle by trade unions, civil society organizations and women's groups, the government passed the Rural Employment Act which guaranteed 100 days' paid employment to each rural household per year and guaranteed. The Act also guaranteed:

- 33% reservation for women at equal wage between men and women;
- the provision of unemployment allowance; and
- safe worksite facilities such as providing drinking water, shade, childcare and healthcare to workers

This was a landmark act and program but it looked very different in practice and its fine intentions faltered in implementation

- Poor Dalit women not aware of the Act and its provisions – there was no outreach to tell them of their rights and with Muslim women – the program implementers at the state level believed that they could not and would not work outside the home in MNREGA jobs
- In some parts of the country women's participation in MNREGA was far below the 33%; in the districts in Uttar Pradesh where we worked, it was about 21%
- Only manual work was given to women because of gender and class biased beliefs among the program implementers and local leaders that semi-literate rural women were incapable of carrying out 'technical' work; semi-skilled jobs only given to men
- No facilities provided at worksite

All over India, various NGOs and local community organizations have challenged these gender power dynamics and stereotypes and shown that they don't hold true through innovation projects. Gender at Work developed a series of innovations that challenged these beliefs to show that alternative ways of working were possible that benefitted women.

What these two examples tell us is that gender power dynamics and deep structures of inequality can derail the best of policy intentions. Now with the increased evidence and

attention to the role of discriminatory social norms in blocking gender equality, how are member states and UN agencies going to respond?

This calls for **new thinking** on how to tackle entrenched gender inequalities, **new collaborations and partnerships** across government, women's organizations and the private sector, and **new investments** in processes of change that can unlock the grip of these gender norms and enable women's leadership to thrive

Change is possible. BRAC, the largest NGO in the world has tested the combination of a gender equality component with its program targeted to the Ultra Poor (TUP). The cost of the combined program (GQAL-TUP) relative to the overall TUP program costs amounted to 4 per cent of total cost which suggests that for a very small investment, efforts to mainstream gender into BRAC programs can have positive benefits in terms of gender equality outcomes (economic assets and resources; changes in attitude, behavior and social norms in families and communities) as well as in adding efficiencies in program implementation and the achievement of other (non-gender) program outcomes.