

# CAWN Newsletter

CENTRAL AMERICAN WOMEN'S NETWORK

NO.19 SPRING 2005

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## Women, the State and Labour Rights Activism: The Role of Women's Organisations in Improving Labour Standards in Nicaragua

by **Cristina Manfre\***

This article highlights how new actors are impacting the debate around labour rights. It attempts to offer answers as to why NGOs are able to influence the formation of labour rights policies at the national level. As women have become the backbone of the labour-intensive manufacturing industries, their ability to advance specific gender interests and improve working conditions is of particular importance to enhancing the overall workplace experience. Drawing on the experience of the Movement for Employed and Unemployed Women "María Elena Cuadra" (MEC), this article discusses how women's groups are organising women workers to influence national level policy formation in Nicaragua. This organisation is successfully filling gaps in the defence of women workers while creating new spaces

for these women to voice their concerns.

Established in 1994, MEC was founded by leaders of the Women's Secretariat of one of Nicaragua's trade unions, the Sandinista Workers' Central (CST). Disillusioned by the union, they left to establish an organisation that would put forth an integrated approach to women's concerns, promoting and defending the full and equal incorporation and participation of women in Nicaraguan society, based on the universal principals of equality, freedom and social justice. Their achievements thus far have included: the successful negotiation of an increase in the minimum wage; the training of 700 human rights promoters and 300 sexual and reproductive health promoters; and, the adoption of an Ethical Code by the Ministry of Labour and FTZ employers.

MEC's achievements demonstrate that it has been able to find ways of effectively influencing national labour legislation. These can be divided into two broad categories. First are the characteristics associated with the current development paradigm, which encourages the participation of civil society actors in supporting or offering alternatives to the state. With respect to the debate on labour rights, NGOs are an addition to a space that is traditionally dominated by more politically charged unions. Not only are NGOs preferred in this situation, but employers explicitly deter unions from organising. With respect to MEC, this means that MEC has been able to succeed in mobilising women on the ground and in negotiating with the state precisely because it is not a union. On the one hand, women join the network because unions have failed to take gender issues seriously. On the other hand, since MEC is not a union, the assumptions about unions' political agendas held by the state and employers are not applicable. As a result, women are less fearful of being fired or blacklisted if they join MEC's network.

The second set of characteristics are attributes specific to MEC. MEC's approach to defending labour rights is non-confrontational and is based on dialogue, mediation and negotiation. The women are trained specifically in negotiation and conflict resolution skills, and take their time



Photo: MEC

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# EDITORIAL

## Don't Forget Central America

Central America is being forgotten. Some will never forget, such as millions in the region who struggle for daily survival and dedicated Northern activists like CAWN. Yet, the countries of Central America are rapidly receding from view. In the global fight against poverty, billions of Chinese and Indians promise greater pay-offs. In economic development, Africa's multifaceted challenges attract more voluminous reports. In global security, Iraq fixes the gaze of Northern policymakers. Central America could be the literal and figurative link between South and North, yet it is rapidly disappearing from the policy map. Disappearance would bring disaster. CAWN intends to turn it into an opportunity.

Central America's disappearance from our collective conscience is typified by the withdrawal of UK resources, personnel and presence. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) is closing its doors in all but a few of its Latin America regional offices. This exit leaves a vacuum. A UK presence moderated larger neighbours who view Central America through lenses tinted by security and profit. Free markets are the US answer to the flow of people, goods, and wealth in the isthmus. With free trade from Costa Rica to Canada, the US economy will absorb Central America into its fringes. Out of sight, out of mind, Central America would settle into its traditional role of cheap labour, occasional holidays, and weak regimes.

On the other hand, the indigenous efforts described here offer a glimmer of hope. As the gaze of international actors focuses elsewhere, an incipient alternative project sneaks under the radar. Bravely, the women's movement of Central America carves out livelihoods, articulates identities, and fights for rights that have been too long denied. As described in this newsletter, the women of Central America are creating an alternative future for the region. To nurture this future and expand the impact of the women's movement, CAWN brings together Central American women and Northern activists.

This coalition is the key to a more just future. Acting separately within our domestic environments, Northern activists and Southern women make important progress. Yet, what happens in the North affects women in the South, and vice versa; forces of inequality and injustice operate transnationally. Transnational activism is CAWN's answer. To the Northern activist community, CAWN brings the information, energy, and organisation of our Southern partners. To women's movements in Central America, CAWN brings resources, exchanges, and support. Central America has not forgotten about us; we urge DFID and our friends in the North: don't forget Central America.

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to approach officials. MEC openly admits to not being a part of the official negotiation between unions and the state, but far from this being a challenge, their willingness to work and to do so in the spirit of collaboration has won them support. As the former Minister of Labour, Wilfredo Navarro commented, "...there is a willingness to work without the need to boycott the efforts that are being attempted at the international level."

This latter point is also an indication of another characteristic: political autonomy.

In a political situation that remains polarised between Sandinistas and liberals, MEC staunchly defends its autonomy. This autonomy is also the result of the struggle the Nicaraguan women's movement undertook to gain independence from the Sandinistas. As Sandra Ramos comments, "...the reality is that many

organisations and unions have a political vision...and this harms the labour movement, it harms the actions of these groups because their political partiality delegitimizes their struggle." It would be a mistake to suggest that the work of MEC is not political as it aims to alter the balance of power between different actors in society and women. However MEC has been very clear about not working under any one particular political agenda and this has been acknowledged by the state.

Their work however has not been without its share of obstacles. The challenges faced by MEC in negotiating with the state are two-fold. First, relationships with government officials are often temporary and successful only when the official is sympathetic to particular interest groups. Although this may always be a concern for MEC, comments by the new Minister of Labour indicate that the relationship with the Ministry of Labour remains positive. MEC's nationwide campaigns in this case become of critical importance as they keep women's concerns in the public eye and avoid them being forgotten or ignored. Secondly, MEC may continue to face challenges since they are not part of the tri-partite (union-corporation-state) model used in formal labour negotiations. Nonetheless their success in influencing policy formulation does indicate that perhaps their actions have overcome this challenge.

The different approaches to labour rights activism are an indication of the complex terrain in which organisations involved in the struggle work. The difficulties lie in the diversity of stakeholders involved at different levels of the supply chain. In all this, the critical issue continues to be the creation of effective regulatory systems. Without clear regulation at the national and international level, the ability to make positive advances will remain difficult. Effective regulation requires that all stakeholders be committed to improving conditions for workers. To date advocacy



Photo: MEC

has remained focused on transnational corporations, leaving national politics aside. To change this civil society needs to lobby national governments and attempt to influence public policy decisions. It is imperative that women's organizations and unions learn not only to co-exist but to support each other's efforts. For women workers, it means creating an environment that is sensitive to women's demands and finding ways of negotiating with the state so as to prioritise these needs.

This article highlights key aspects of a larger thesis, for a copy of the full thesis please contact Cristina Manfre at [crismanfre@hotmail.com](mailto:crismanfre@hotmail.com)

*\*I would like to thank CAWN for providing the material on MEC on which this paper was based.*

## CAWN Newsletter

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# Violence against Women in Honduras

by **Mirta Kennedy** Centro de Estudios de la Mujer de Honduras (CEM-H).  
Translated by Marilyn Thomson

In Honduras, as in other countries in Central America and Mexico, there has been an alarming increase in social violence affecting women. In 2004, nearly 200 women were murdered in Honduras and there has been an increase in street violence such as assaults, thefts and sexual attacks. In December, in an act of urban terrorism, masked men got on board city buses and killed a number of passengers, including several women. Some of the factors fuelling the situation in the region are social and political instability, unemployment and increasing poverty, which affects half the population in Central America and over 70% in Honduras. There is also an increase of drug trafficking and other types of criminal activity such as trafficking in people, especially women and girls.

Violence is a daily reality for Honduran women and especially for those who have the least resources (who are in the majority). They are exposed to public violence such as thefts, physical assaults and sexual attacks, and young women and girls in particular are targeted by urban gangs, by commercial sexual exploitation rings and pressurized by drug networks to get involved in dealing. Many women are in prison because they were caught dealing small amounts of drugs, while the big traffickers have not been caught.

In October, the Women's Collective against Violence, working with a Congresswoman, presented a motion in the Honduran Congress to create a Commission to investigate femicide (the assassination of women). It was approved, although the Commission has not yet presented its report. The Women's Collective ran a campaign of activities against the violence in November, which had as its slogans "No more deaths. The women have names, so do the murderers. Stop impunity". They participated in radio slots and programmes, posters were widely distributed and a huge march took place supported by the Bloque Popular – an important coalition of trade unions and civil society organisations. On the 24th of November an inter-institutional Commission presented a proposal to Congress to reform the existing law on domestic violence. The reform hardens the



Mirta Kennedy, co-director of CEM-H speaking at a consultation seminar in San Pedro Sula, Honduras with a number of civil society organisations, state officials, legal experts together with the Inter-American Commission of Women and international agencies such as ILO/IPEC, UNICEF, and CIDA among others. Working in a strategic alliance to take forward the proposed changes to legislation and the National Action Plan to combat exploitation and trafficking the proposed legal reforms.

penalties against the aggressors and creates mechanisms for greater protection of victims. The Women's Collective against violence collected many signatures supporting the reform but Congress has still not approved them.

In Honduras political impunity and the lack of government budgets to deal with social violence are some of the obstacles women's organisations are fighting against. A worrying development is that the major political parties with the greatest chance of winning the elections support repressive measures and a hardening of the repression. The current leader of the National Congress, who is standing for National President for the National Party, is proposing the death sentence. This, in a country where the system of justice is questioned daily because of corruption. Recently there were public demonstrations demanding the removal of the State Attorney who has been accused of covering up corruption among former high ranking public officials and a former president of the republic.

Women's organisations are also demanding the approval of legal reforms to the Law against Violence including penal code increases in the punishment for sexual

aggressors and traffickers. However legislation to control trafficking and commercial sexual exploitation which was presented in October 2004 has still not been approved. They are also pushing for the strengthening of institutions that are being dismantled, such as the special Attorney for Women. They also want to see an increase in transparency and ethics within the system of justice.

Civil Society organisations have responded to the situation with an increase in services for women affected by violence. For example, two refuges have recently opened (one in La Ceiba and the other in Choluteca) though state provision seriously lacks resources, staff, vehicles and equipment to deal with the problem. The increase in femicide and the serious increase in other forms of violence against women is the main issue currently concerning women's organisations in the region. In December 2004 in Guatemala the Feminist Network against Violence against Women was reorganised. A number of coordinated activities have been planned regionally, such as carrying out research, producing comparable information by country and taking concerted actions to advocate against the situation.

Photo: Marilyn Thomson



## The worst form of blindness is being blind to your rights

by **Megan Caine**

Two representatives of the María Elena Cuadra Women's Movement (MEC), Martha Rivera and Nohemí Flores, toured England and Scotland towards the end of last year. CAWN organised the tour with financial support from the Methodist Relief and Development Fund and CAFOD, and the logistical support of its members and local solidarity groups around the UK.

Between them, Martha and Nohemí are involved in much of MEC's training and advocacy work, principally, but not exclusively, around promoting and protecting the rights of women garment workers in the free trade zones of Nicaragua ('maquila workers'). Martha is currently MEC's director in the Chinandega region and Nohemí, although a trained accountant, has been a factory worker in Managua's Las Mercedes free trade zone for the last ten years and was one of MEC's first volunteer 'promoters'. She works to make other women workers aware of their rights and of the training and support offered by the Movement.

### Raising consumer awareness

The slogan of one of MEC's successful campaigns 'the worst form of blindness is being blind to your rights' was the message that Martha and Nohemí set out to spread to all audiences on the tour. This was meant to raise awareness among workers in the South

and make consumers in the North aware of how southern workers' rights are abused, often while local governments turn a blind eye. The tour took place in Brighton, Bristol, London, Leeds, Manchester, Glasgow and Aberdeen and was packed with a wide range of events, including a Women Working Worldwide seminar on core labour standards, the Ethical Trading Initiative AGM and the No Sweat London conference. The specific aim of the tour was to raise consumer awareness of the working conditions in the garment for export industry in Central America and the demands of women workers for change, and also to highlight the link between labour rights and trade, in particular in the light of the pending Central America Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

From her own experience as an employee, Nohemí was able to present a stark, tangible image of life in the maquilas. The companies operate a piecework system with workers 'forced' to work overtime to finish their quotas or be faced with the very real risk of losing their jobs. Jobs have recently been lost in Nohemí's own

factory which declared itself bankrupt and offered the workers jobs in another factory too far away for most of them to travel. This occurred at a time when the effects of CAFTA were already being felt – ironically at the moment it is cheaper to buy imported chicken than the home grown staples of rice and beans.

In spite of this, MEC has nevertheless had a number of impressive achievements. The number of women attending their annual meeting has more than quadrupled since the first one in 1998, and these meetings have helped to increase MEC's status and credibility. They have also been carrying out a widespread media campaign on health and safety at work, calling for all employers to supply, and workers to use, protective clothing such as masks and earplugs, and they are currently planning an economic literacy programme.

### Women's solidarity

Whilst in Aberdeen, Nohemí had the chance to visit the Women's Centre, which provided an inspiring example of women working together on a mainly voluntary basis,

### University seminars

Martha and Nohemí spoke at City University in London as part of a Gendering Globalisation public seminar series. The topic was women's rights and labour rights in the world factories of the global economy. Students at City University studying Gender and Development were inspired by women who are on the front line and related the exploitation and difficulties they faced. Also, they attended a lunch time seminar at the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex, where students from Gender and Development and Development Masters courses were particularly interested in MEC's role in empowering women who were not organised in trade unions. One way in which MEC supported these women was by introducing MEC negotiators into tripartite bargains between unions, businesses and government agencies. Additionally, MEC representatives visited Leeds University's International Development department. The students were specialising in international development and this was an opportunity for them to relate their theoretical understanding to a practical level.



From left: Nicaraguan, English and Scottish women in solidarity with MEC in Aberdeen; at the No Sweat conference in London. and with solidarity activists in Glasgow. Photos: Megan Caine and Rebeca Zúñiga-Hamlin

against a backdrop of ever-decreasing funding. Likewise in Bristol, both women had the chance to show their solidarity with local women by taking part in a candlelit vigil on 25 November, UN Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women.

## "The hope of the future"

In two of the cities visited the local groups had a specific interest in raising consumer awareness through educational work at school level. In Leeds, school visits were arranged via the local Development Education Centre as part of an ongoing cross-curricular project on development, fair trade and human rights. In Bristol the women met with a small group of A level Spanish students, and pupils involved in a school fair trade group who had been looking at the potential effects of CAFTA. Nohemí and Martha felt that educated young people at sixth form and university level are the hope of the future and are in a privileged position – and have a responsibility – to affect change at a regional level, an additional element of Martha's work is with women who survived the devastating landslide caused by Hurricane Mitch in 1998; supporting them to set up and run small enterprises as a possible alternative to working in the maquilas. This was of particular interest to the younger children she met with, some of whom, as asylum seekers, were able to identify with the feelings of loss Martha shared with them.

## A 'Big Issue'

A range of media work during the tour helped to spread awareness of the issues addressed by MEC. Martha and Nohemí were video-interviewed as part of an ongoing film archive project in Glasgow, run by local artist Jan Nimmo. The Big Issue in Scotland published an article around the tour and MEC's work. Martha and Nohemí felt that the tour provided them with ample opportunity to reach a variety of interested groups and to acknowledge the support, both financial and otherwise, they receive from the North. They were able to communicate over and over the message that women in the region want to work, but with dignity, and that consultation with the women workers themselves should always be a priority. We hope that the tour will have helped to strengthen existing solidarity networks and that pressure continues and is increased on all actors involved in the maquila sector.

Get up, get involved, get active!

**JUST GARMENTS** is the only unionised "maquila" (factory) in El Salvador. (Read their photographic story at: [www.couleurorange.com/philippe.revelli/just\\_garments/index.html](http://www.couleurorange.com/philippe.revelli/just_garments/index.html)) The company was created out of negotiations that ended a labour conflict in El Salvador. The conflict resulted when the STIT union solicited collective bargaining from a Taiwanese company in April 2002. The company responded by shutting down its operations. STIT and CEAL initiated an international campaign that received the support of organisations in Asia, the United States, and Latin America. The textile union UNITE, the AFL-CIO, the International Textile Federation (ITGLWF), US-Leap, Campaign for Labour Rights, USAS, Focus on Globalization and many other organisations joined forces to bring about the November 2002 agreement which led to the creation of Just Garments in April 2003.

**TEXTILE WORKERS IN HAITI** scored what appears to be a tremendous victory. On February 5th, the Sokowa union in the free trade zone in Ouanaminthe, north-east Haiti, negotiated an agreement with bosses from the giant textile assembly company, Grupo M. Less than a year ago, in a factory assembling Levi jeans and t-shirts for export, the company fired over 350 workers, including all known union leaders. An international pressure campaign included email protests, pickets of Levi stores, speaker tours and fundraisers organised by No Sweat, the Haiti Support Group, Battersea and Wandsworth Trades Council and others. The pressure and the money assisted the workers and their union to keep going. The company finally agreed to immediately re-instate five union leaders, progressively re-hire approximately 150 other people, acknowledge the legitimacy of the Sokowa union, assure it full rights under Haitian law, and guarantee never again to use armed security guards or other armed groups to intervene in labour disputes. More at [www.nosweat.org.uk](http://www.nosweat.org.uk) or [www.haitisupport.gn.apc.org](http://www.haitisupport.gn.apc.org)

**MAQUILADORES ARE LEAVING CENTRAL AMERICA** The maquiladoras, factories in the Export Processing Zones, are leaving Central America. Through March 2005, 18 companies have closed operations and left over ten thousand people unemployed. The reason for the closure of the companies is China's increasing access to the United States textiles market. In January 2005, preferential treatment for Central American textiles ended, and China gained

equal access as a member of the WTO. Solely in Guatemala, 14 companies have left the country. (Salinas Carlos, El Nuevo Diario, Nicaragua, 3 March 2005)

## GLOBAL WEEK OF ACTION – BEIJING AND BEYOND

The Centre for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL), Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN), and the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO) have joined together to initiate a global campaign to celebrate Beijing+10 and link local, national, regional and international NGO actions according to their own priorities and interests, based on both implementing and going beyond the BPfA. As of mid-December 2004, more than 60 networks have agreed to co-sponsor the initiative. Individual organisations are invited to endorse and become involved in the campaign. To join, email [endorse@beijingandbeyond.org](mailto:endorse@beijingandbeyond.org) with full contact details. For further information, including a campaign kit and a calendar of events: [www.beijingandbeyond.org](http://www.beijingandbeyond.org)

## MAKEPOVERTYHISTORY

This initiative is calling for urgent and meaningful policy change on three critical and inextricably linked areas: Trade, debt and aid. In the UK, 2005 will be a unique year of opportunities to get the development message onto the political agenda and drive forward the struggle against poverty and injustice. These opportunities include the UK holding the presidency of the G8 and the EU, the likelihood of a general election and the report by the International Commission for Africa. To seize these opportunities, a growing number of organisations and networks have decided to work together in a joint 'mobilisation'. How to join: contact Romina Vegro, BOND, Regent's Wharf, 8 All Saint Street, London N1 9RL. Tel: 020 7520 0257 or e-mail: [rvegro@bond.org.uk](mailto:rvegro@bond.org.uk) or visit: [www.bond.org.uk/advocacy/2005](http://www.bond.org.uk/advocacy/2005)

**WOMEN'S CALL FOR ACTION** 28 May 2005. "End Violence Against Women". The Women's Access to Health Campaign (WAHC) Health for all, health for Women: NOW! The Call for Action 2005 will be coming your way in April. Within the WAHC, this year's Call focuses on the impact of Violence Against Women as a public health concern and a human rights violation. The links between violence and

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Photo: NGH

# Demand Rights & Respect for UK homeworkers!

## Report on the National Group on Homeworking Christmas campaign

**T**hey must think women are gullible and we're not. We have got a voice. They think they can get away with stuff because we are women and think we are a soft touch but we're not. They don't see it as a legitimate job because we're women in the home. They think we are lazy and we are not. I'd like to see a man do a woman's work, to sit and do the homework, the housework, see to the children and the cooking. Hard enough for them to do one job, let alone two or three'

– A homeworker speaking after an employment tribunal had denied her employee status, despite her having worked for the company for seven years

Homeworking marks a significant contribution to the UK economy yet it remains one of the most invisible forms of employment. Homeworkers, the majority of whom are women, carry out paid work from home assembling, packing and making a diverse range of products such as greetings cards, assorted gift packs, stationary items, gift wrapping materials, hosiery, cosmetic and beauty items that are then supplied to well known highstreet retailers and supermarkets. Homeworkers are undoubtedly one of the most vulnerable and marginalised groups, who face conditions that often fall far below minimum standards. Since homeworkers work alone they often have little contact either with their fellow workers or with organisations that could offer advice and support. However, for many, homeworking offers a way to combine earning a living

with their particular domestic situation: as a parent with small children or the main carer for elderly relatives. Others cannot easily work outside the home because of disability or ill health, or simply because there are few alternative employment opportunities in their local area. This makes them particularly dependent on their homeworking income, and so reluctant to take any action that might jeopardise their work in the future.

The National Group on Homeworking (NGH) exists to support homeworkers and to campaign and lobby on their behalf. Through research and regular contact with homeworkers, NGH have found a series of employment rights violations taking place. Although there have been some improvements in recent years, many homeworkers are still being paid well below the minimum wage, indeed a report by the NGH in 2003 of homeworkers in Bradford, West Yorkshire, found that the average hourly pay rate was only £2.53 an hour. Research this summer has also highlighted

other concerning trends. For example 75% of the interviewed homeworkers regularly worked unsociable hours (many through the night) to complete orders on time and 25% put in more than 60 hours a week at particularly busy times. Many homeworkers face irregular work, lack of representation, poor health and safety conditions and in most cases fear speaking out about such violations.

Just before Christmas the NGH launched a popular campaign to place pressure on some of the Big 4 supermarkets (Asda, Tesco, Sainsbury's, Safeway-Morrisons) who have homeworkers in their supply chains. The campaign was initiated by the publication of a joint report from NGH, Oxfam and the TUC in May 2004, 'Made at Home'. The report highlighted the double standards of many major retailers who have signed up to the Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI) and who have vowed to protect the rights of homeworkers within their supply chains but who in reality are still breaching many of the agreements they have signed up to.

A postcard campaign was launched, petitions signed and sent to the Big 4 and awareness raising stalls and actions carried out across the UK. Campaigners were also encouraged to send letters to their local MP's and the DTI (Department of Trade & Industry) calling for the National Government to tighten up the loopholes in existing employment legislation that allows employers to incorrectly classify homeworkers as self-employed and thus evade the responsibilities that come with full employee status. As one homeworker stated:

*"They can do what they want, you have no employment rights. The company have you on a string, at their convenience, and this should not be allowed"*

– A homeworker, unhappy being defined as a casual worker, September 2004.

- To find out more about the NGH please see <http://www.homeworking.gn.apc.org/>, or to find out how you can get involved please contact Jill @homeworking.gn.apc.org



Photos: NGH



# In Women's Words: Sexual Harassment on Banana Plantations

by **Marina Prieto-Carrón** University of Bristol /  
Central American Women's Network

**M**ainstream feminism describes sexual harassment as an unwanted and unsought intrusion by men into women's feelings, thoughts, behaviours, space, time energies and bodies. One women worker told us "I was transferred to different jobs and in each of them, the boss tried something with me", while another added: "not only the bosses but also men in middle management positions". An older woman reminds us that "sexual harassment is nothing new, but that all women have had to put up with that".

The emotional costs involved are also familiar for women workers: "I left the job because I could not stand the harassment any more and because I was pregnant. Because of this, my husband was also putting pressure on me to leave the banana plantations". Another woman used the adjective 'poor' to show feeling sorry for a woman suffering sexual harassment: "and the poor 'compañera' has to do it because of the big need". While another tells us: 'those lions eat' the women because women need desperately to find a job. If the woman is head of the household and has four or five children, then she is going to be weaker and fall victim to this. This happens because of

her need and the stupidity of men that take advantage of women needing to make a living".

Women seeking jobs or with short-term contracts (often only a few months) due to be renewed are put in a very difficult situation, "when a woman asks for a job because she needs it, the boss tells her that if she goes to bed with him, he can give her a job, otherwise 'no' is the answer"

Once they have a job, women workers are also arbitrarily rewarded and punished. As they tell us: "When one does not want to then she is given the worst and heavier jobs"; "It is known when a woman goes to bed with the boss because she gets a better job"; "women have to allow being 'touched' by the middle management, a man, in order to keep their jobs and not be fired".

## Denouncing Sexual Harassment

Women workers face many obstacles in order to be able to denounce these types of sexual harassment. As a woman worker put it: "Whatever happens, the woman being harassed is not going to talk. She must be telling herself that I do not say anything about the boss because I would be fired and I will not have anywhere to work". While

another confirmed that "we cannot denounce them because we are not taken seriously".

When it comes to legal retaliation, there is a lack of support and financial resources to take the cases forward "there is no support for the women. Even if there are organisations, what happens is that to take a case to court you need money to pay a lawyer". A woman worker trade unionist tells us that: "we in the trade union have taken cases to court but the employer will play the same game and will take him (the harasser) out, pay the judge a bribe, and then the tale has finished".

## Actions to take

Specifically, women banana workers asked to raise awareness among women workers for actions to be taken: "in order to be able to educate others about it or to do something about it, I have to be conscious and denounce it. For example, if a man tells me something and sexually blackmails me by threatening to fire me, I can go to the trade union representative and to talk to him about this". Women also ask for training of male workers: "not only for women but also for men. They have to change". Support from organisations working on human rights and labour issues is then vital. Women expressed this "yes it has to be eliminated with the support of some organisations, for example human rights ones".

Moreover, women banana workers working for a multinational (directly or on a subcontracted basis) can use codes of conduct as a tool. Codes tend to include prohibition of sexual harassment or at least a general clause on discriminatory behaviour and harassment (see for example, the SA800 guidelines and Chiquita code of conduct). Women workers know of the possibility of consumer pressure on multinationals in the North to enforce better working conditions in general and to deal with sexual harassment in particular. As one women worker said: "we would talk to foreign people about it. That they know what we have to live with".

## Notes:

1. These voices have been captured as part of my ongoing research on women workers and codes of conduct in the banana and textile factory in Central America. For more information, contact me at Marina.Prieto@bristol.ac.uk
2. Two focus groups with women banana workers (organised with a local trade union) in Chinandega, Nicaragua took place in August 2001.
3. I thank the women workers who gave their time to participate in the focus groups discussions. Their hopes and struggles are always with me.

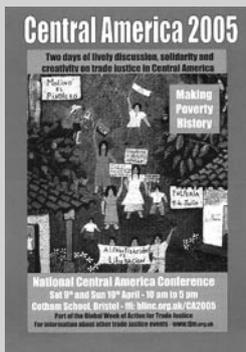
# ACTIONS & UPCOMING EVENTS

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women's health are well established, yet few policies and poverty, inequality and conflicts increase violence against women. It is time for governments to take responsibility for women's access to health and approach violence against women as a public health issue! Take action for women's health! For further information contact: The Global Network for Reproductive Rights, Vrolijkstraat 453-D, 1092 TJ Amsterdam, The Netherlands. Tel: +31 20 620 9672, fax: +31 20 622 2450 or email: wahc@wgnrr.nl Download the Call from [www.wgnrr.org](http://www.wgnrr.org)

**KEEP THE PRESSURE ON.** The Centre for Health and Gender Equity is calling to support unconditional reaffirmation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA). The U.S. Delegation to the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) has confirmed that they will continue to oppose reaffirmation of the BPfA on women's rights unless all other country delegations agree to adopt the U.S. amendment limiting women's choices in reproductive health care. The U.S. is insisting on inserting language into the document denying women's rights to choose to terminate a pregnancy, even though the BPfA does not address abortion issues, and even though access to safe abortion services is legal in the U.S.A. Opponents of women's rights and the BPfA agreement have mounted an international campaign supporting the U.S. effort to scuttle this historic women's rights agreement. The US delegation will cite these messages as proof that women worldwide support the U.S. in antichoice policies.

Send an email to the [usmission@gmail.com](mailto:usmission@gmail.com) AND to the Commission on the Status of Women: [csw49@un.org](mailto:csw49@un.org) stating: (For Individuals:) "I oppose the U.S. amendment to the CSW Declaration, because the draft Declaration now accurately reflects the global consensus reaffirming the Beijing Platform for Action. I call on the U.S. to stop obstructing reaffirmation of the Platform for Action." (For Organizations:) "[Name of organization] opposes the U.S. amendment to the CSW Declaration, because the draft Declaration now accurately reflects the global consensus reaffirming the Beijing Platform for Action. We call on the U.S. to stop obstructing reaffirmation of the Platform for Action." Your Efforts are Working but Action Still Needed to Reaffirm Beijing Platform



solidarity and creativity to support the campaign for trade justice in Central America. Central America 2005 is part of a week of international action on trade Justice. Speakers from Central America will talk about trade, gender, the environment, poverty and social movements. This is an opportunity to look at, and debate in more depth the situation in the region, and to develop positive strategies for solidarity and campaigning. Wheelchair access and a free crèche are available. For Further information contact: Karen Bell. Tel: 011 7947 0132; email: [karenbell50@hotmail.com](mailto:karenbell50@hotmail.com) or visit: [www.blinc.org.uk/CA2005](http://www.blinc.org.uk/CA2005)

**ETHICAL TRADING INITIATIVE** – ETI Biennial Conference: **"Ethical trade: shaping a new agenda"**. 12-13 May 2005. Novotel London West. I Shortlands London W6, UK. This international conference will provide you with the opportunity to:

- Help shape a new agenda for ethical trade – make your priority issues heard by global brands and retailers, investors and multi-stakeholder code initiatives.
- Share experiences with other NGOs – from both the South and North – on how to tackle issues such as worker education, homeworkers, smallholders and migrant workers in China.
- Collect case studies of positive corporate practice – examples that can be used to convince other companies to follow suit.

For further information contact the ETI Secretariat at: Cromwell House, 14 Fulwood Place, London WC1V 6HZ, UK. Tel: 020 7404 1463; fax: 020 7831 7852; email: [eti@eti.org.uk](mailto:eti@eti.org.uk) or visit: [www.ethicaltrade.org](http://www.ethicaltrade.org)

**WOMEN IN DEVELOPMENT EUROPE – WIDE** Annual Conference 2005 **"Poverty, inequality and insecurity: What solutions do feminisms have?"** 23-25 June. Regent's

**CENTRAL AMERICA CONFERENCE 2005: "Making Poverty History"** 9 & 10 April 2005. Cotham School, Cotham Lawn Road, Cotham Bristol BS6 6DT. Two days of lively discussion,

College Conference Centre, Regent's Park Inner Circle London NW1. WIDE's annual conference presents a unique opportunity for participants to share knowledge and leadership experience and to enhance strategic networking and information sharing abilities on the advancement and empowerment of women and gender equality. WIDE will also be celebrating its 20th birthday. Join to look back on the achievements, highs and lows, and the evolution of the network. Contact: Netsy Fekade, Gender and Development Network Coordinator, Construction House, 54-56 Leonard Street, London EC2A 4JX. Tel 020 7549 5700; email [gadnetwork@womankind.org.uk](mailto:gadnetwork@womankind.org.uk)

**NICARAGUA SOLIDARITY CAMPAIGN** NSC Nicaragua Solidarity Study Tours 2005 – supporting social and economic justice in Nicaragua. Providing opportunities for people to gain first hand experience of Nicaragua is central to the work of the NSC. Since 1984 over 1,000 people from England, Scotland and Wales have taken part in brigades, study tours and delegations to exchange experiences and to build mutual solidarity with Nicaraguan organisations committed to social and economic justice.

- Fairtrade study tour, 30 July-9 August
- Living and working with fairtrade producers, 9-19 August
- Education/literacy study tour, 20-30 August
- Community Theatre Project, 2 weeks autumn 2005.

NSC, 129 Seven Sisters Rd, London N7 7QG. Tel: 020 7272 9619; fax: 020 7272 5476; email: [nsc@nicaraguasc.org.uk](mailto:nsc@nicaraguasc.org.uk); or visit: [www.nicaraguasc.org.uk](http://www.nicaraguasc.org.uk)

**NICARAGUA SISTER COMMUNITIES CONFERENCE** 16-17 July 2005 in CIPRES (the Centre for Rural and Social Research and Development), Managua, Nicaragua. Is your organization a sister city (formal or informal)? Or is it some other type of sister or friendship community, such as a sister parish, sister state, sister island, or British "twin town"? You're invited to co-sponsor and attend the sister communities conference. For further information: Nicaragua Network 1247 "E" Street Washington, D.C. 20003 (202) 544-9355, Tel: + 1 202-544-9355, email Barbara or Kathy at [Barbara@AFGJ.org](mailto:Barbara@AFGJ.org) or [Kathy@AFGJ.org](mailto:Kathy@AFGJ.org), or visit: [www.nicanet.org](http://www.nicanet.org)

**PEOPLE'S HEALTH ASSEMBLY 2**  
July 17-21 2005  
Cuenca - Ecuador  
VOICES FROM AROUND THE WORLD ARE CALLING!  
TOGETHER, LET US BUILD A HEALTHY WORLD  
For additional information contact: [pha2@phmovement.org](mailto:pha2@phmovement.org) or visit [www.iphglobal.org](http://www.iphglobal.org) [www.phmovement.org](http://www.phmovement.org)