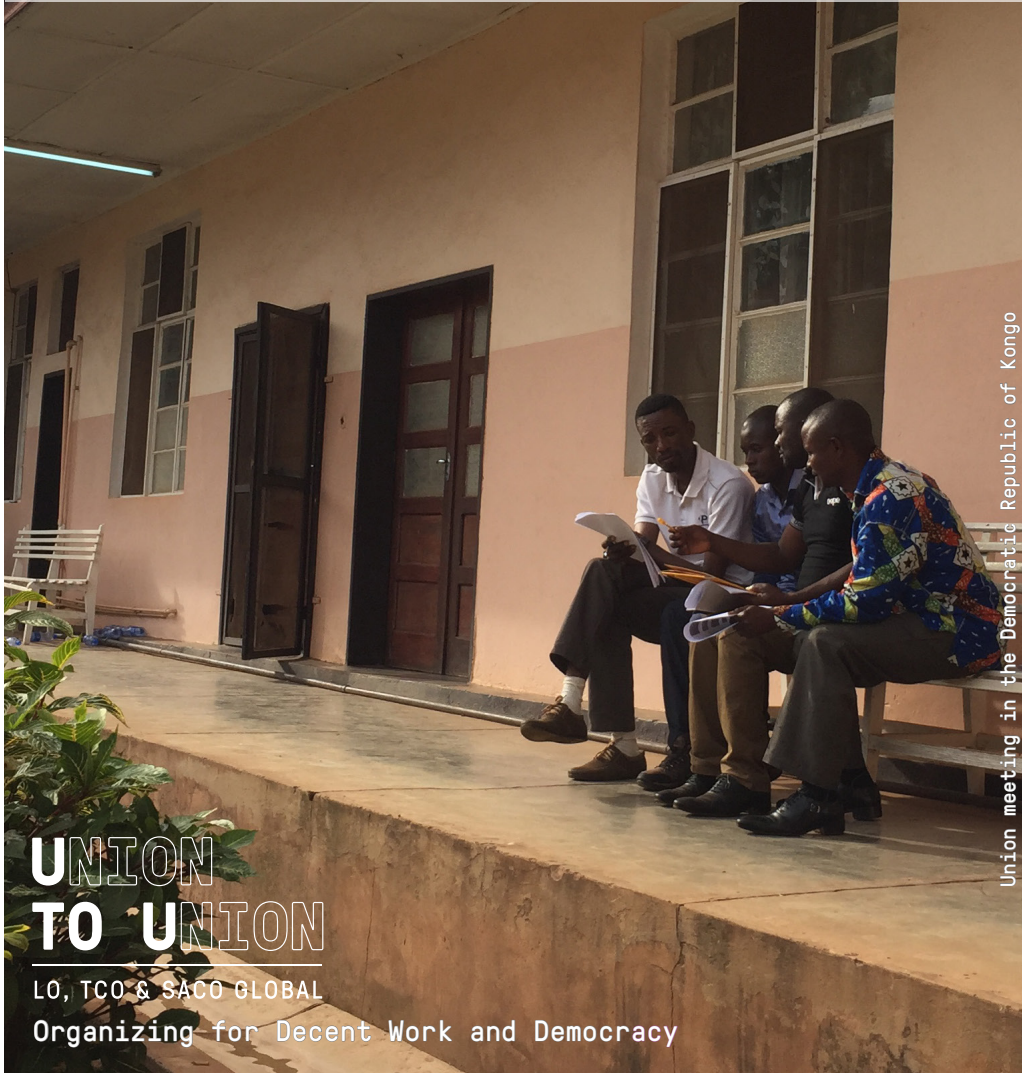


MEN AS AGENTS OF CHANGE FOR GENDER EQUALITY



Union meeting in the Democratic Republic of Congo

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Organizing for Decent Work and Democracy

Men as agents of change for gender equality

This document is a short version of the report *Gender work in trade unions – Male champions of gender equality* which looks into if and how men promote gender equality within the trade union movement.

The study has examined whether there are unions within Union to Union's network which engage men in changing stereotypical male behavior, which can be obstacles to gender equality, as a strategy to promote gender equality within the unions, among unions affiliates, at workplaces, or/and in society in general.

The purpose is also to identify factors that drive men to act for gender equality within the trade union movement. Work environment issues, such as risk-taking and safety, are highly gendered, connected to self-perception and societal views on femininities and masculinities. Discussions regarding new and norm-critical perceptions of masculinities within trade unions could consequently engage both women and men in challenging gender norms related to different branches and occupations and thereby gain more occupational safety.

The full-length report is mainly based on a desk review and on interviews with leaders and staff (both women and men) at national and global trade unions. 22 interviews have been conducted with respondents in Europe (including Sweden), Africa, Asia, the Middle East and Latin America during the period December 2015 to March 2016.

The work has started

Most of the contacted unions have implemented a general gender mainstreaming approach, focusing on women's labor rights and women's representation within the trade unions.

All the interviewed respondents spoke about the increase of women in leading positions within the unions, the higher share of women as members and how women's labor rights now are taken into account to a larger extent than they were 10 to 20 years ago.

The findings also suggests that initiatives focusing on changing stereotypical male behavior, highlighting the role of men as agents of change as a strategy to promote gender equality, are still very much pioneer work. Few unions have used targeted actions focusing on men or masculinities in their gender equality initiatives.

"Stereotypical male behaviour may hinder increased gender equality" The study suggests that there are several thematic areas where unions could deepen their discussions on how stereotypical male behaviors may hinder increased gender equality. For example, men predominate in dangerous industries such as mining, and stereotypical attitudes regarding what men could and should endure at work results in the neglect or denial of men's security and labor rights.

Even if no stories were shared by male union activists targeting other male members with raising awareness and activities to promote gender equality, there were several men who stated that they saw themselves setting an example as men promoting gender equality showing other men that they also could/should join the struggle.

Most interviewees agreed that the role of union leaders, who are men in most of the referred cases, is important. The top leaders' articulation in favor of gender equality plays a key role. By complying with decisions made at conferences, congresses and in cooperation agreements, they promote gender equality.

"New forms of organization and innovative ways of leadership are necessary" Nonetheless, many unions still struggle with patriarchal and hierarchal structures.

Most of the consulted respondents did actually not see these top leaders as actors of change, and expressed that women's organization and demands rather no longer leave room for leaders who do not promote gender equality.

Many of the interviewees stress that trade union culture and structures constitute a barrier for change, and that new forms of organization and innovative ways of leadership are necessary. However, many examples were found on how unions have worked successfully to commit men to work with gender equality.

What inspires male unionists to work with gender equality?

There is a growing number of male unionists with a strong commitment to gender equality. Most male union leaders and men with coordinating functions who are engaged in gender equality actions and processes, have become so as a result of gender work initiated and led by women. These respondents admit that women's empowerment and ability to claim their rights has forced them to support gender equality work.

There are many men who support the work initiated by women. The interviewees claimed that this commitment is sometimes based on men's own conviction and what they have learned from female union activists. In other cases, their support for gender equality work is a result of complying with union policies, congress and management decisions or cooperation agreements with international partners.

The interviews also confirmed that projects focusing on women's labor rights and roles in unions contributes to increased awareness and engagement among men. According to most respondents, making gender equality a labor rights issue was the best way forward; they referred to and used experiences from class-biased power relations and intersections with other forms of discrimination in society.

The issue of identification seem to be important for engagement. According to some participants there were examples of the engagement being triggered by incidents when a friend or a relative where exposed to gender discrimination.

To summarize, the report shows that the men who have been involved in these processes start to change not only at work, but also in their homes and private lives, thus forcing them to reflect on their own stereotypical thinking.

Policy compliance without personal conviction might be instrumental, but the question is how transformative it is. The findings indicate that real transformative change happens when the union leaders and members also embrace a feminist and/or a critical approach to traditional masculinity and femininity roles.

How to move forward

Initiatives aimed at changing decision-making structures and leadership within trade unions, as well as gendered labor rights and work environment issues, would benefit from a more norm critical approach. Discussing examples from different branches and trade unions, or experiences in neighboring countries, challenges what is seen as possible and what "is not done in our culture".

A stronger focus on men, the behavior of male affiliates and men's roles in gender equality at work and within trade unions, should be combined with continuous support for the empowerment of women workers and unionists. Without strong organization among women, the focus on men as agents for gender equality will not be successful.

Recommendations for further work

1. When developing and introducing new gender strategies and methods, make sure that these are backed by a formal decision at a high level within the unions.
2. Focus on how leadership and traditional decision-making structures within the unions are constructed along traditional masculinity models.
3. Explore the possibility of gender projects that focus on environment issues and risks at the workplace by looking into how stereotypical masculinity and femininity roles increase the risk of accidents and abuse.
4. Support men to connect and build alliances with gender and women's rights activists, both within trade unions and other social movements.
5. Link unions' work on the right to parental leave for both women and men to the experiences of organizations and activists that engage men for gender equality.
6. Use active methods and real case studies in union trainings and related activities to raise awareness and promote engagement among both women and men.
7. To focus on different power relations and open up for a more norm-critical way of thinking would benefit affiliates that live with disabilities, LGBTI members, or those who belong to other discriminated groups in society.

The full-length report by Annica Holmberg can be ordered from info@uniontounion.org



Sigrid Bergfeldt, Head of programs at Union to Union

What do you think about the report?

- We are happy that men have been heard in the question of gender equality and that there is so much engagement regarding women’s rights amongst our partners.

Why was it important to carry out this study?

- We noticed that most of our projects focuses only on when women dealing with the issue of gender equality. We consider that men need to take the “what’s in it for me-perspective” into account in order to really engage in transforming gender roles. This will lead to a better world for all.

How can affiliates continue with this work?

- So far, gender equality work has first and foremost focused on women as actors for change, as if only women benefit from gender equality. This without any deeper analysis concerning how gender norms affects everyone in work places, society and trade unions. The issue of men as agents of change for gender equality has to be prioritized for the benefit of human rights for all.

”Gender equality is for the benefit of human rights for all”

What is important to think about? Any do’s and dont’s?

- It is important to continue to learn from each other, to exchange experiences between different countries when meeting different cultural believes it is also a good way to reflect about that differences between men and women rarely are biologically explained but rather a fruit of social context. I have been in so many interesting discussions that have taught me to question norms. A norm critical perspective also helps to question prejudice on sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.



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