



STEELWORKERS *Humanity Fund*

December 2016

Empowering Women to Fight Violence

In August 2016, four Canadian Women of Steel travelled to Mexico to share a unique experience with activists from several Latin American countries, learning from and empowering each other to tackle a deeply embedded culture of violence against women.

The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women reports that one in three women around the globe will experience some type of violence in her lifetime.

Violence against women occurs outside the glare of the public eye. It often happens in familiar environments behind closed doors, around husbands, fathers, uncles, bosses, teachers and even friends.

“Violence against women is not all bloody lips and black eyes. It is emotional abuse and financial control, street harassment and reproductive coercion. At its roots, such violence is about power, sexual entitlement,

how we view masculinity and the very fabric of our identities.” (The Guardian)

Denial is a typical reaction to women denouncing violence. Denial by minimizing the aggression. Denial that the aggression actually happened. Denial by blaming the victim. Denial by claiming women deserved the aggression. Denial by women believing it is a reality they have to live with or that they deserve.

Structural violence – involving a system of discrimination and marginalization – can be subtle, even imperceptible. A system that denies women full access to democratic processes, justice, education, health services, well-paid jobs and positions of power pushes women into poverty and precarious living conditions. Countries with high levels of structural, social and economic inequality have higher rates of violence and abuse against women.

Workplace violence and abuse involves any kind of behaviour that causes

women emotional, physical, sexual or financial harm. It includes verbal and sexual harassment, assault, stalking and many other abuses of power, such as forcing women to work long hours, to pass pregnancy tests, to be subjected to demeaning language, discrimination and threats.

Exchange on Violence Against Women in the Workplace

For the past few years, the Steelworkers Humanity Fund (SHF) has organized international exchanges to address issues of violence against women. These exchanges have involved SHF’s partner organizations throughout Latin America that work with women to promote their rights to equality, justice, education, democratic and economic participation, and a life free of violence.

The latest such exchange, Violence Against Women in the Workplace, was held August 29 to September 2, 2016, in Mexico City. Hosted by the Humanity Fund's partner organization, the Authentic Labour Front (FAT), the event included representatives of several labour and women's organizations in Latin America and four Canadian Women of Steel – Terri Rinta, USW Local 2020; Carrie Robinson-Hofstetter, District 6 Staff Representative; Nancy Hutchison, USW National Health, Safety and Environment Department Leader; and Laura Ramirez, Steelworkers Humanity Fund Staff.

The exchange was aimed at empowering women to learn from each other's experiences, identify mechanisms to prevent and eliminate violence and to assist women confronting this issue in the workplace.

Participants toured a Bombardier assembly plant near Mexico City and met with women members of the Mexican Mine Workers Union (Los Mineros) to learn about their working conditions. A three-day workshop provided participants with a better understanding of different kinds of violence, introduced them to mechanisms available to combat violence and gave them materials to build awareness in the workplace.

Orfe Castillo, guest speaker at the Violence Against Women in the Workplace exchange, is the Executive Director of JASS – Just Associates – a global, women-led human rights network working towards the promotion and defence of women's rights.

Visit To The Bombardier Plant

During the Bombardier plant tour, a small group of young women workers agreed to meet with the delegation to talk about the issues they confront daily at work. No one could have imagined the seriousness of the issues faced by these women.

When Bombardier first opened the plant in Ciudad Sahagun, two hours from Mexico City, about 100 women were hired to work in the assembly of small parts for airplanes.

At its roots, such violence is about power, sexual entitlement, how we view masculinity and the very fabric of our identities."

(The Guardian)

The women were highly specialized technicians trained for these specific jobs. They were unionized and were paid the same salaries and benefits as the men. These were very well-paid jobs by Mexican standards.

Problems arose immediately as male workers felt threatened by the sudden presence of women in the plant. The women were insulted, demeaned and marginalized by their male co-workers. The union tried to resolve the issue by forming a separate bargaining unit, while the company created a separate eating area and entrance for the women. These measures only intensified the harassment.

More recently, following the opening of two competing airplane assembly plants near the Bombardier facility, the company said it needed concessions from the workers. Salaries were cut by 40% and many workers were laid off.

The women's unit was particularly hard hit by the layoffs, losing 75% of its members. The job insecurity has contributed to even greater violence against the women, as if they were responsible for the company's decisions.

The Bombardier workers' experience is a clear example of what women, particularly those in non-traditional jobs, experience at work every day. Hearing their story moved many of the exchange participants to tears, while the affected workers thanked the delegation for its concern and solidarity.

"For every woman victim of sexual abuse, there is a man who abuses women. We are talking about men who are brothers, fathers, sons. We need to find effective and safe mechanisms for women to denounce acts of violence against women without fear of persecution or blame."





“The extent to which all of the women in the workshop had confronted violence and discrimination in their working lives quickly became apparent.”

Julia Quiñones, the workshop facilitator, is the Coordinator of the Border Committee of Women Workers (CFO), a grassroots organization working in the maquiladoras in the northern region of Mexico to educate and organize women workers around labour rights issues.

Sharing Experiences

By Julia Quiñones

This exchange was remarkable in that it brought together women activists from seven countries and a broad range of life and work experiences. Participants included workers from gas stations, the sex trade, traditional and artisanal mining and the informal economy.

The extent to which all of the women in the workshop had confronted violence and discrimination in their working lives quickly became apparent. Each participant linked her experience to the causes and impacts of violence and the obstacles that deny women their human and labour rights. They shared

touching and powerful testimonies of abuse and discrimination. They each acknowledged that organizing and working together to make violence visible is key to confronting and resolving these issues.

The group identified many causes of workplace violence, including stress created by threats of plant closures, unreasonable production quotas, workforce reductions and harassment from men who feel threatened by women occupying jobs in non-traditional sectors like mining, gas stations and manufacturing.

Participants recounted how employers often blame female workers when situations of violence arise in the

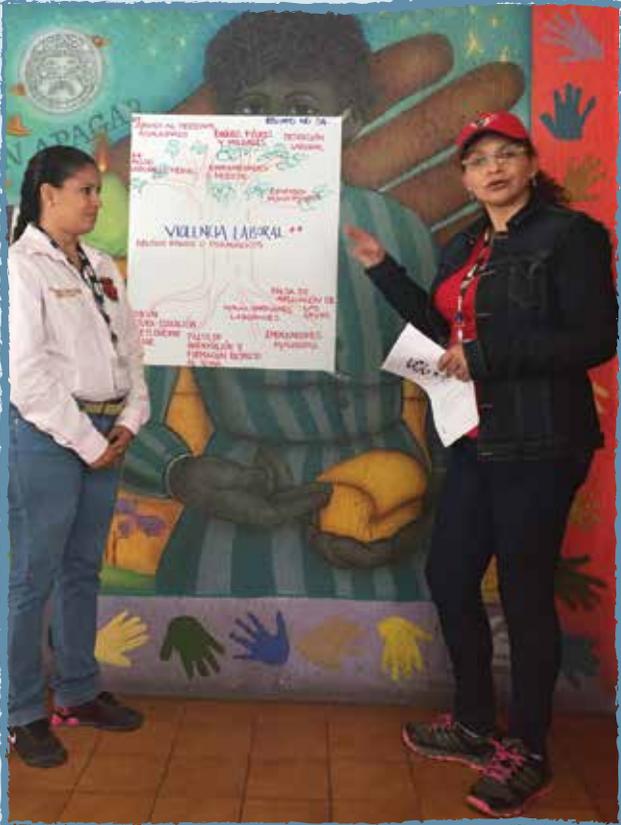
workplace, rather than establishing rules and policies to prevent and resolve these issues.

The women learned about strategies used by various organizations to combat violence, such as urging the United Nations’ International Labour Organization (ILO) to create a new convention to regulate violence against women in the workplace.

In spite of the commitment and the hard work of so many women’s, labour and human rights organizations, everyone agreed there is much to be done to eliminate violence against women.

Meanwhile in Canada:

- ▶ Half of all Canadian women have experienced some kind of physical or sexual violence.
- ▶ Young women aged 15-24 are most at risk of experiencing violence.
- ▶ Indigenous women are three times more likely to experience violence than non-Indigenous women or men.
- ▶ More than 3,000 women stay in shelters on a given night to escape abuse.
- ▶ It is estimated that over 1,100 Indigenous women and girls are missing or have been murdered.
- ▶ Sexual assault and partner violence costs taxpayers \$9 billion per year. The overwhelming majority of the victims are women.



Exploring the root causes of violence against women



Getting ready for the plant visit



Sharing experiences of harassment in the workplace



Weaving ties of solidarity



Arriving at the Bombardier plant

Building Skills to Challenge Violence Against Women

Nancy Hutchison

USW National Health, Safety
and Environment Leader

*“Empowerment
is critical, for all
women who
are working
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change.”*



Powerful Tools to Fight Violence

By Nancy Hutchison

Solidarity and support are key components to helping women sustain the courage and commitment to bring issues forward.

The exchange brought together labour and social justice activists to develop awareness and tools to bring back to our communities to broaden our networks and connections. There is power in numbers. We must reach out to allies and like-minded organizations that can help us achieve our goals. We must strengthen our networks and coalitions, we must use our unique skills and expertise to mobilize and expand our lobbying efforts to eliminate violence and harassment in our workplaces, our homes and our communities.

Participants in the exchange recognized that empowerment is critical, for all women who are working so hard for change. Through training, education and skills development, women gain self-confidence, self-esteem

and self-assurance. They recognize that empowerment is within them.

Empowerment is critical, for all women who are working so hard for change.

As Steelworkers, we shared our experience in combatting workplace violence and we highlighted the importance of strong legislation to enforce women’s rights and equality. In Canada, it took numerous deaths – mostly of women – to finally force the governments to act and adopt new laws. The labour movement, women’s organizations and social justice groups worked together to demand strong, enforceable legislation to prevent all forms of workplace violence and harassment. New legislation was proposed for comprehensive policies, procedures and best practices to prevent workplace violence and harassment. Employers have the obligation to guarantee a safe and healthy workplace, free of all forms of violence, including sexual violence and harassment, and domestic violence and its impact in the workplace.



Terri Rinta

Chair, USW Local 2020
Women of Steel Committee



“The stories that were shared revealed a cold reality of embedded gender roles, discriminatory treatment and violence.”

Eye-Opening Testimonies

By Terri Rinta

One of the workshop exercises during the exchange provided an in-depth, unique learning opportunity for participants. We were asked to share a childhood memory of a moment when we felt treated in certain way because we were born women. The stories that were shared revealed a cold reality of embedded gender roles, discriminatory treatment and violence.

Two stories stood out for me. A woman recounted how, as a young girl, she would be beaten by her mother if she was not home before dark, simply because she was a girl. Her brothers were not subjected to such treatment.

Another participant spoke of being raised by a single mom. Her mom’s own brother would beat and degrade her and her children because he was embarrassed that his sister did not have a man to take care of her. One day, when the girl had become an adolescent, she stood up to her uncle. She told him “if you ever come back and hit my mother, I will call the police and have you arrested.” She did not back down. He left after a struggle, but eventually stopped abusing her family. This girl is now a successful lawyer, defending women’s rights.

It is almost indescribable to have sat across from these women and to hear such stories, that some might believe only happen in the movies.



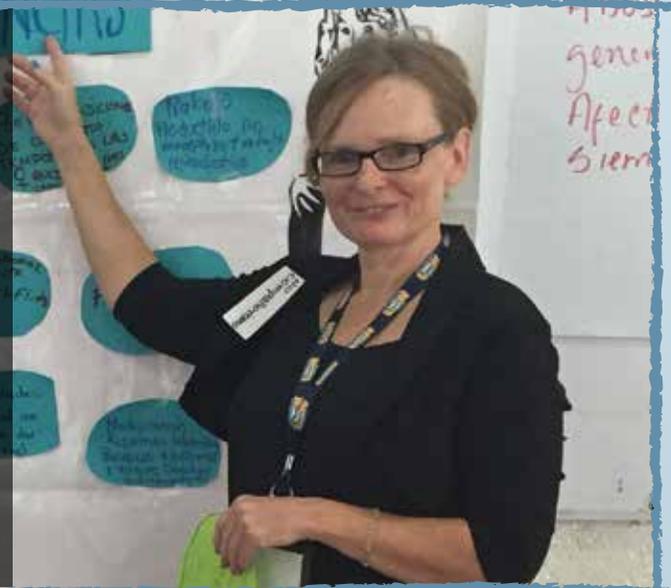
Top Left: Angelina Aspuac (left), Executive Director of AFEDES, Women’s Association for the Development of Sacatepequez, Guatemala with Nancy Hutchison.

Left: Women members from the Los Mineros union proudly hosted a meeting at their training centre.

Carrie Robinson-Hofstetter

USW Staff Representative,
Hamilton office

"I didn't realize that violence is not normal. I've been living with violence in my workplace and in my home, my whole life."



"I didn't realize violence is not normal"

By Carrie Robinson-Hofstetter

There was a tangible yearning among participants for more education on how to prevent and stop violence and harassment against women in the workplace. Many of the sisters requested more training on how to negotiate provisions in their collective

agreements to specifically address violence.

The Canadian delegation learned so much from our Latin American sisters. I was struck by a particular initiative undertaken by some of these activists. Their organizations not only train, counsel and support women in their workplaces, they also involve their male co-workers. Men are included in education programs and are encouraged to assume a role

in stopping violence and harassment against women.

There is no question in my mind that this exchange was a success! I will always remember a comment from one of the sisters: "Before this workshop, I didn't realize that violence is not normal. I've been living with violence in my workplace and in my home, my whole life. I want to change that now and you have taught me some ways in which I can do it."

PARTICIPANT ORGANIZATIONS

AFEDES	Women's Association for Development – Guatemala	FEASIES	Federation of Associations and Independent Unions of El Salvador	MEC	Movement of Working and Unemployed Women
FAT	Authentic Labour Front – Mexico	FESIMINI	Mining Federation of Nicaragua	ORMUSA	Organization of Salvadoran Women
CEPROMIN	Centre for the Promotion of Mining – Bolivia	FESTRAS	Federation of Food, Agricultural and Similar Workers Unions of Guatemala	SNTMMSSM	National Union of Mining, Metal and Steel Workers of Mexico
CFO	Border Committee of Women Workers – Mexico	FNTMMSP	Federation of Mine, Metal and Steel Workers Unions of Peru	USW	United Steelworkers

Thank you to the Steelworkers Humanity Fund's partner organization in Mexico, the Authentic Labour Front (FAT), our sisters from Los Mineros for hosting this event and to Julia Quiñones whose help in developing the materials and facilitating the workshop contributed greatly to the success of this exchange.

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