

# Young women join hands for a decent life

In August this year a group of women launched the Decisions for Life Trade Union campaign. **Nina Benjamin** talks about this exciting campaign aimed at young women workers in the service sector.

In March this year the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) and Union Network International (UNI) met with representatives from the four South African trade union federations (Cosatu, Fedusa, Nactu and Consawu) and local service sector unions (Saccawu – commercial/catering; Cwu – communications, and Sasbo – banking) to plan for the Decisions for Life (DFL) Trade Union campaign in South Africa.

Since this meeting in March we have established a trade union campaign coordinating team consisting of representatives from all federations and the service unions.

The DFL campaign is part of the Decent Work, Decent Life for Women Campaign and targets women in the service sector in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine. The campaign targets adolescent women because these industries employ the majority of working women aged 15 to 29 and because services are growing in most of the 14 countries.

As part of the South African campaign we have started canvassing the views of young working women in the service sector. The view of one striking woman SABC worker in July this year in many ways sums up the

feelings of many women in the service sector.

“I have been in this job for four years now. Ever since I started working my working conditions have not improved at all. We still have bosses who complain whenever a woman goes on maternity leave. They feel they have a right to teach us about family planning. As long as I’m in this job I will always be treated like a minor. This is also encouraged by the way they address us. When I got this job my supervisor always called me baby because I was the youngest. I liked it then because it made me feel welcomed. Now I hate it because it means I am a child and cannot challenge my supervisor because I am young. I feel like a child in my mother’s house.

For me the increment is as important as the working conditions. I need recognition and respect. I need a better wage so that I can be able to put bread on the table. What does Decisions for Life offer me as a woman? I would like to know more about my rights and how to claim them. For now I only have a feeling that something is wrong.”

There is an overwhelming view that young women are often ignored, overburdened, sexually harassed and experience a lack of opportunity to make choices to improve their lives.

At the same time the work in the campaign has also revealed a strong commitment on the part of young women to deal with these challenges.

## LAUNCHING CAMPAIGN

On 29 August 2009 we launched the South African campaign under the banner: ‘Taking power as young women to make decisions for our lives’.

At the launch women defined the campaign as being about young women having the confidence, understanding and power to make decisions about all aspects of their lives. Joining a trade union, choosing a career, accessing study opportunities, choosing a partner, having control over one’s body, choosing when to become a parent, being able to remain free from HIV, balancing personal, work, and in some cases trade union involvement and being able to enjoy youth without all the pressures of taking care of dependents such as siblings and parents.

Essentially the campaign is about making the dreams of young women a reality. With the campaign we also aim to strengthen our trade union capacity to negotiate better pay and working conditions of young women workers and to increase union membership rates.



At the launch more than 300 young women who work in call centres, retail stores, shopping malls, as housekeepers in hotels, as secretaries and administrators in large manufacturing companies, trade union administrators, young women involved in informal service work and a small group of women looking for jobs came together to identify their common challenges, dreams and collective strength.

The majority of these young women are part of the trade union movement and a key motivating feature of their involvement in the DFL campaign is to ensure that the voices and needs of young women become central to unions organising in the service sector. They also want to make unions attractive and friendly for other young women workers.

At the launch young women across federations, with different trade union experiences and from different work environments came together in solidarity around their common needs and interests as young women.

#### WHAT ARE WE DOING?

With the DFL campaign we are attempting to work within three spheres of the lives of young women. These are the workplace, trade union and at the personal or private level.

We aim to raise awareness about the need to improve legislation to protect young women workers in the workplace. We also aim to increase union recognition particularly in workplaces like call centers where all workers, but especially young women, face extreme hardships.

Through focus group discussions and the involvement of some key young women workers who identify themselves as ambassadors for the campaign, we are hoping to develop strategies that assist in recruiting young women in call centres. Presently we are still focusing on finding creative means of raising awareness as regards legislation. We are using postcards, drama and interactive websites like

[www.mywage.com](http://www.mywage.com) to assist in this process.

Our focus for work within the trade union involves trying to develop more innovative gender and age sensitive recruitment practices. We have elected a group of young women from the four federations who are the 'faces' of the DFL campaign. These women are our spokespeople. With the 'faces' we are trying publicly to show that unions are not just for older workers.

We are also creating forums where young women who might want to share their experiences, but who are not ready to join a union, can freely participate. These forums are also spaces where union members are then able to discuss with, and recruit, these young women into the union movement.

Within the retail sector a layer of young women workers from Saccawu are engaging unorganised young women workers in shopping malls about issues affecting them. A Saccawu team of young women workers are part of the campaign

coordinating structure and regularly write reports and reflect on their experiences of organising young women in the retail sector.

'Understanding the personal as political' is a key feature of our campaign. We are trying to make our organising and discussion spaces places that allow for young women to speak about their private and public challenges and victories. When planning for the launch one comrade summed up the general feeling of the young women in the meeting, "There is a lot of sadness but we want to use the August 29 to show the strength of young women in responding to issues that are often seen as your private business like sexual harassment."

The older union women organisers who are assisting with the campaign have defined their role as mentors. They are mentors who can reflect on both the private and public challenges of being part of the union but also mentors who have to listen and be respectful of the challenges facing young women. LB

## Decent work, decent life for women campaign

**If you would like to be part of this exciting campaign, you can contact the following people:**

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