

Campaigning for the adoption and ratification of C190 in Benin and Senegal

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Forthcoming book by Jane Pillinger, Robin Runge and Chidi King “The global campaign to outlaw gender-based violence and harassment at work” Agenda Publishing, publication in early 2022.

In our forthcoming book, we refer to two important and successful campaigns for the ratification of Convention 190 that were carried out in Benin and Senegal. Here we give the story of these campaigns and how women’s trade union leadership, engagement of men in trade unions and alliance building helped raise awareness of the problem and opened up spaces for women to talk about gender-based violence. In Benin, union awareness raising with journalists and media organisations aimed to promote awareness of gender based violence and harassment (GBVH) and through responsible media reporting.

COSI-Benin’s campaign for C190 and the role of the media

COSI, the national trade union Confederation in Benin, built the campaign for ratification as part of their strong commitment to gender equality. In a country with high rates of GBV, a union movement increasing feminised through organising and recruiting workers from the informal sector, and a union leadership that was committed to the issue, it was not surprising that the Convention became an important tool for union engagement, recruitment and organising in Benin. Studies have shown the extent of GBV and that it is reinforced by a deeply patriarchal culture and the low status of women. A study by the Benin Ministry of Family and National Solidarity (2009) found that as many as 70% of women and girls in Benin have experienced some form of GBV.

In September 2020, Ayicha Amoussa Massadimi, president of COSI’s Women’s Commission, CONAF, launched a programme to sensitize women about their right to work in freedom from violence and harassment. A pilot gender participatory audit, funded by the Dutch-CNV Internationaal, carried out with COSI in the autumn of 2020, included an objective on ending GBV and campaigning for the ratification and implementation of C190. The campaign responded to an urgent need for change in social norms and attitudes towards women, improved laws and better awareness of power and control including psychological violence and harassment. As a passionate advocate of gender equality and women’s empowerment, Calixte Adiyeton, COSI-Benin’s Coordinator for the CNV Internationaal Programme, stressed that in the workplace, GBV is closely connected to the existence of significant structural gender inequalities and unequal power relations:

...the issue of violence and harassment is a social scourge with causes rooted in the culture of several regions of the country. Their manifestations are multifaceted with harmful consequences on the socio-economic life of the country and where women are silenced through threats, insult, intimidation, witchcraft, inhuman and degrading widowhood rites. Verbal and psychological violence constitutes attacks on the personality of women and children (especially girls), their image, their self-esteem and their inner balance.

In addition, in Benin as in other countries in the region, there is a pervasive culture of sexism and “sextortion” results in the extorting of sexual favours in return for employment, goods or services, which ratification of C190 could be a first step to tackling in a serious way (Mathot 2019, Transparency International 2019).

As soon as the trade union delegation returned from the ILC in 2019, meetings were organised by an alliance of women leaders of the women's committees of the central trade unions, to mobilize of stakeholders across civil society, employers and government. The goal was to ensure that the process for ratification was included in the government's Annual Work Plan (PTA) 2021. Extensive lobbying of the government had paid off, resulting in the government including the Convention in the PTA of the Directorate of Labor Standards in 2021. COSI's commitment to this process, including the union's listening and support services for victims of GBV, was praised by the Ministry of Social Affairs and its branches in all the municipalities of Benin.

Awareness raising actions have aimed at getting maximum national visibility, for example, through a TV programme, and panel discussions on TV; lobbying of the government through the Director of Labour Standards and the Director of the Family and Solidarity; and lobbying with employers' organisations. In the summer of 2020, when a case of #MeToo was revealed in Benin by a well-known television personality, CONAF issued a declaration calling for the government to ratify C190. This sparked an unprecedented national debate about sexual harassment that were carried into the union's campaign as part of 16-Days of Activism in 2020. Publicity about the unions listening and support service was used as a platform for ratification of C190 for Benin. TV and radio broadcasts, along with learning workshops for women workers were held across the country, aimed at breaking the silence around GBVH. For the first time the union saw women speaking about their experiences, "...many of these women have found themselves through the evils that this Convention prevents and sanctions. In all cases, the sensitizations allowed free speech. For the participants, talking about these abuses is no longer a taboo subject." In collaboration with CNV Internationaal, COSI decided to share its experiences by making a video on their fight to eliminate GBV at work and the importance of the worldwide ratification of C190 (See: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ER5PuxMT5Ic>)

Building on the media attention given to sexual harassment, COSI engaged in wider awareness raising through a training workshop for journalists, held on 2 October 2020, designed to give journalists a better understanding and reporting of the law and the pervasive culture of women victim blaming. The objective was to ensure sensitive reporting and a tool to end violence against women. As Calixte Adiyeton of COSI-Benin makes clear, media actors are important partners in the campaign to end GBV and their role is critical in paving the way for the campaign on C190: "Today, we cannot position ourselves on a subject as important and sensitive as the issue of combating GBV without involving media actors who we expect to accompany us being well equipped." (ITUC-Africa 2020:1) As Calixte Adiyeton says ratification of C190 is not only designed to improve the law, but it has also had a huge impact in helping women to gain a voice and to have possibility to take power and speaking out against violence and harassment. As can be seen in the testimony of a member of the union, a survivor of GBV, who contacted the COSI-Benin hotline, her experience of harassment at work helped to take a stand in contribute to change:

I was living alone at one point in my married life because my husband had made a long trip to Europe. My boss being informed of this situation exerted repeated psychological pressure on me sometimes even going to touching. I resisted but the pressure was so strong that I ended up resigning my job. So I lost my job and today this situation has forged my convictions and I am involved in an NGO serving people who are survivors of such violence in their workplace.

Late 2020 COSI started a WhatsApp group on GBVH, called 'On en Parle' (talk about it), that serves as an awareness raising and discussion forum for care providers, medical doctors, psychologists, confidential counsellors, legal advisors and trade union staff. Based on real cases from the newspaper and other media, Marilyne Sourou from COSI facilitates the discussion while cautiously breaking taboos and explaining the legal framework.

Campaigning for ratification led by a coalition of women leaders in Senegal

Trade unions in Senegal played an active role in the campaign for C190. An absence of legal provisions prohibiting GBVH, and stigma and taboos around reporting violence against women, have made ratification of C190 an important priority for unions. The trade union campaign for ratification began in July 2019, immediately after the adoption of C190. Although the Government of Senegal voted for the adoption of the C190, a lack of progress in moving towards ratification added urgency to the union campaign. A C190 women's trade union coalition was formed by women leaders from five union confederations (CNTS, CNTS-FC, CSA, UNSAS and UDTs) under the National Network of Women Trade Unions of Senegal. The campaign was coordinated by a central unit to organise awareness-raising meetings in workplaces and at company levels and lobbying of government. Women trade union leaders, Mariama Diallo, Secretary General of UDTs, Cheikh Diop, Secretary General of the CNTS-FC and Khady Badji, President of the national women's committee of the UDTs, have spoken with one voice in promoting C190 as a tool for gender equality, social justice and respect for fundamental rights in the workplace. In an interview, Moussa Diop, UDTs's Coordinator for the CNV Internationaal programme, spoke about the importance of C190 for Senegal:

The ratification of C190 will provide a historic opportunity for Senegal to engage resolutely in the fight against violence and harassment at work. Its implementation can help change a culture of impunity and bring new guarantees for the safety and dignity of workers, no matter who they are or where they work... Ratification of C190 will provide a legal framework that fills a legal void that will make it possible for the first time to denounce and punish GBVH in the workplace, as human rights violations.

The UDTs played a key role in raising awareness, advocating and negotiating for the adoption of Convention No. 190. Following the adoption of the Convention in June 2019, UDTs played an active role in the lobbying and advocacy campaign for ratification by the government of Senegal. To carry out its actions, in collaboration with unions, CSOs and employers, UDTs relies on its solid experience in the field of the promotion of gender equality and that of its general secretary, Mariama DIALLO, one of the rare women leaders trade unions in Africa. Thanks to UDTs' leadership role in inter-union cooperation in Senegal and its strategic alliance with the CNV Internationaal, the International Labor Organization, the International Trade Union Confederation/Africa, the National Network of Women Trade Unions of Senegal, the UDTs has distinguished itself at the national and international levels in an important campaign to strengthen constructive and inclusive dialogue, including a gender dimension to promote equal rights and wages and more power in the workplace for women. Lobbying actions are carried out by the National Network of Women Trade Unions of Senegal with decision-makers for the ratification of C 190 of the ILO. This Women's Network was formalized under the leadership of UDTs and is made up of women leaders within several unions and unions: UDTs, CSA, CNTS, UNSAS and CNTS-FC, all grouped together in the CSI (International Trade Union Confederation). The Network has a political mandate to achieve several objectives such as increasing the unionization rate of women, addressing the issue of gender equality and the fight against violence against women in the workplace.

As part of the campaign to get the government to ratify C190 by 31 December 2021, an impressive range of campaign events have been held, aimed at awareness raising, building a coordinated campaign message and tools, and lobbying of government. Specific attention has been given to training for women trade union leaders, including a national training workshop for women on

lobbying and advocacy techniques to prepare the C190 ratification campaign, on 10-11 October 2020. On 16 October 2020, a coordination event was held by the General Assembly of the National Network of Women Trade Unions of Senegal. The meeting noted that the adoption of ILO C190 was a “special moment for women” and the women leaders in the coalition called on the government to ratify C190. Coumba Dickel Diawara, the National President for Women at the CNTS union, presented a statement to the press that was broadcast on national TV, launching the awareness raising campaign for the ratification of C190, calling for the urgent ratification of C190 and to ensure that women are protected from GBVH in the world of work. At a sectoral level support and solidarity has been given from global unions. An example is the launch of a campaign to ratify C190 on 10 November by CNTS unions affiliated to IUF. The campaign has also been taken into schools through the National Committee of Women Teachers for the Promotion of Girls' Education (CNEPSCOFI).

Lobbying and advocacy meetings were held with the relevant government ministers. At a meeting held in December 2020, the government gave their full support to the National Network of Women Trade Unions of Senegal for rapid ratification of C190, noting that the Convention had been submitted to the authorities for ratification. Overall, unions in Senegal believe that the campaign has had very positive results, and aside from the success of the lobbying for ratification, the scope, framework and language of C190 is already being used in collective agreements (see below), including the first national agreement to adopt the framework of C190.

CBA drawn up by the Coalition of Senegalese Trade Union Confederations

Immediately following the adoption in June 2019 of the C190, the Coalition of Senegalese Trade Union Confederations, affiliated to ITUC, carried out a period of intense lobbying and advocacy activities with the Senegalese government and employers' organisations, urging them to ensure that GBV and the fight against violence and harassment in the workplace was included in the discussion for the then negotiations for the National Interprofessional Collective Agreement (CCNI). Union lobbying successfully resulted in the inclusion of articles on trade union rights and freedom of association (Article 10), non-discrimination (Article 19), equality of treatment between women and men (Article 20), and on violence and harassment (Article 21) in line with C190. During the negotiations one of the trade union negotiators, Cheikh DIOP, of CNTS-FC, urged Senegal to "take into account the orientations of the ILO C190 in the new National Interprofessional Collective Agreement with a view to offering new perspectives to workers, particularly in terms of gender equality and respect for fundamental rights." In particular, Article 21 draws on the language of C190 in stating that workers have the right to a world free from violence and harassment, and the agreement calls for an inclusive, integrated and gender-responsive approach to violence and harassment:

The signatory parties to this Convention undertake to promote and realize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment, by adopting an inclusive, integrated approach taking into account the objectives of decent work, respect for the principles and fundamental rights at work and gender considerations, to prevent and eliminate all forms of violence and harassment at work. (Article 21) (CNES, CNTS, UNSAS, CSA, CNT/FC 2019)

This was one of the first national agreement to be negotiated with the express commitment to implement the main principles of C190, and specifically the right to a world of work free from violence and harassment. Now it is down to implementation.

Next steps...

The next steps are important to ensure that C190 is ratified in both countries, but also that the momentum and power of the movement and campaign for C190 becomes part of a wider movement to end gender-based violence. An important part of this is that women hold power in the workplace and in their unions. It is important that unions walk the talk and lead by example. With a view to this, both COSI Benin and UDTs Senegal are involved in the piloting of CNV Internationaal's 'gender audit': a participatory tool for self-evaluation available for trade unions to measure progress towards gender equality in their internal and external policy.