

Nicaragua

CTCP: **Promoting Women's Leadership** **and Participation in the Union**

Summary

A self-employed workers' union, based in Managua, Nicaragua, has worked with TUC Aid to recruit and support more woman members while reforming its structure to ensure that women can take senior roles in its previously male-dominated federations and regional branches.

The self-employed workers of the streets of Managua – moto-taxi drivers, shoe repairers, street food vendors, barbers, tailors, mobile phone sellers, porters, money changers and many more – face different challenges to those employed in a country with the best workers' rights in the region. The workers in this sector, estimated at 90,000 people, ply their trade in historically difficult circumstances, for many years in the face of laws that forbade street selling, with the police and city authorities finding ways to make their lives impossible.

Even now they are excluded from social protection, working long hours for money that falls well short of an equivalent living wage. With the majority of the women traders also single mothers, this creates enormous difficulties for the business, for the future of their children and for their potential participation in the union.

Realising that the issues faced by these women needed to be addressed, CTCP's approach was to recognise that this would only happen if women were properly represented in the union. That meant ensuring that the union had more women members, and equal representation for women at each level of the union.

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Background

Nicaragua's economy is growing steadily, outperforming all but one (Panama) of Central America's countries, but it remains the second poorest country in the Americas. Wage growth is keeping pace, but similarly from a low base.

The Confederation of Self-Employed Workers (CTCP), an affiliate of the FNT (an ITUC member confederation) represents Nicaragua's independent workers providing services from Managua's streets, including food and drink, repairs and transport, as well as mobile labour such as electricians and plumbers, in addition to more traditional, formal workers.

The street-based sector, criminalised under pre-2006 governments, has organised itself with the help of the FNT and slowly built an effective and growing union able to represent these micro-enterprises and help them collaborate to overcome the challenges they face. The union reports that there were over 90,000 such workers on the streets of the capital, facing

much harsher working hours than the country's average and still struggling to make a living wage.

At the start of the project CTCP had 60,000 members, of whom only 48% were women, despite their dominance of the sector. 65% of the CTCP membership were younger workers under 36.

The service sector produces around half of Nicaragua's GDP, but the self-employed workers in it work longer hours and have less access to social security. Street based workers include food vendors, mechanics, tailors, barbers, rickshaw drivers, and mobile-phone sellers. The previous law banning street work left such workers vulnerable to crime and sexual harassment, though the gradual mainstreaming of their economic role and the role of CTCP in representing them has helped reduce these problems significantly.

“We were evicted from our pitches and we were threatened by the police, who wanted to put us in jail just because we were selling on the pavements”

In Nicaragua 41% of men work as “owners of enterprises without employees,” with 55.7% of women working with the same absence of proper employment protection.

They work much longer hours than the country's average, leaving workers little time for union activity. The prevalence of women, with the majority of them single mothers, further reduces the opportunities for engagement and activity. This leads to a predominantly female sector having a male-majority union run by male-dominated branches. To their credit, the CTCP national executive – already much better gender-balanced - recognised the unsustainability of such a set up and worked up a plan to reverse it.

As shown by the ITUC's survey of rights, Nicaragua may have problems but, compared to its neighbours, the legal backdrop is relatively positive. Apart from some limitations on the length of strike action, the country's workers' rights legislation is sound, though as with many countries in Latin America the quality of enforcement does not yet match the laws.

However, the workers plying their various trades on the streets of Managua have suffered from a different set of problems, defined not by their status as employees (most are not), but with struggles against the city administration and – up until a change in the law finally legitimised street selling - attempts by the police to clear them from the streets. The attitude of the authorities also left the workers vulnerable to exploitation and criminal activity.

Widening recruitment and representation in the union has helped manage some of these issues, with collective action crucial in forcing the local government and law enforcement to change their attitude and regulations.

The project

The CTCP, its members facing hostility from authorities and exclusion from social policy, education and poverty reduction programmes, recognised that it needed to recruit more workers and better represent them within its structures. The TUC Aid project represented an opportunity to address this.

A request from the CTCP Women's Committee fitted perfectly into the union's growing agenda of developing internal solutions to external problems. By assessing the needs of members, activists and officers, the union could position itself as a more effective negotiating force as well as improving the lives of thousands of workers.

The Women's Committee request was that the union look seriously into overhauling radically its representation of women at a senior level and beginning a programme of recruitment and advancement that would see more women not only joining the union but also participating in its work and – ultimately – taking senior positions in much greater numbers. To achieve this a training programme, with subjects ranging from helping women free up their time from work and domestic duties to participate, to training for potential union leaders, would be developed and implemented. Men in the male dominated regional branches and committees were slowly persuaded that the benefits to the union of an influx of new members and the identification and training of a new wave of leaders would strengthen and refresh CTCP rather than threaten their positions. Fostering mutual respect became a core part of the strategy.

“Our working conditions are very difficult and problems have often in the past been solved in a violent or offensive way, but we have learned through the project to overcome this by working together”

The CTCP executive, which unlike its regions and federations already had a gender balance, undertook to set up a parallel programme of structural reform to ensure that the women recruited and trained had the necessary opportunities to participate in union work. As a first step they agreed to expand their existing patchy network of women's committees to cover more regions and localities, creating and resourcing 11 new committees in areas where they were absent, with the potential for over 100 new women activists to become involved in the union.

On the ground, CTCP knew the project would fail unless it addressed the barriers to participation for ordinary women involved in the various trades represented by the union. Amongst those problems, the sheer time burden of running a business combined – frequently – with single motherhood or other caring responsibilities meant even the idea of

attending a union meeting, let alone standing for office or volunteering as an activist was unthinkable. By giving access to even basic training – many of the workers having had no education around how to run their businesses – it was hoped that at least some of the women would spend a degree of any time saved to give something back to the union that had helped them through participation and activism.

Of course, the same barriers that prevented women engaging in the union would also interfere with their ability to undertake courses, so the union used its existing network of members to provide collective crèche coverage at each of the courses.

On the Street

The effect of the greater representation of women has been felt swiftly on the streets of the capital. The new women leaders have quickly gained a reputation as ambitious and fearless negotiators, as shown by their pursuit of an agreement that the Managua authorities provide kiosks for all their members that needed them. This state provision of shelter represents a profound turnaround in the attitude of the authorities, who have now granted semi-permanence to workers they had previously been trying to drive off the streets altogether.

This new cooperation was also valuable when a construction project threatened the livelihoods of 200 CTCP members. Instead of the authorities using this as an excuse to drive the 200 out of business, as would have once been the case, the union has secured new pitches for them in other parts of Managua.



Maribel Baldizón, Fruit Seller at the bus stop in front of the University of Central America, and CTCP member

The union is also fighting to reverse the long-standing exclusion from social protection that have made the lives of their members so much harder, with recent reports suggesting that they are likely to succeed.

The union also took the opportunity to address one of the most serious by-products of their members' business models. With almost half of all children aged 7-14 engaged in some sort of employment in Nicaragua, it was natural for the children, particularly those who had been accompanying their mothers to work since they were babies, to start helping out, with little stigma attached.

Through the project, the union has worked to raise the issue with its members, encouraging them to send the children to school and working with their contacts in government to facilitate this and deal with any serious problems. CTCP report that child labour in their sector has already dropped, and they are working on plans to reduce it still further.

Women's Networks

Early in the project, CTCP's National Women's Committee held a National Assembly to agree a project work plan and their key objectives. Throughout the project, they met every fortnight to carry out their oversight of the project, ensuring that the goal of increasing membership and representation of women in the union was met and that the training packages recognised the priorities of women members.

The new committees were founded around women already active at branch level, but gave them a chance to formalise their involvement and become more visible to other members and to the authorities with which the union negotiates. These authorities were initially reluctant to speak to women but, according to CTCP, have increasingly learned to respect the new officers.

As part of the project not only did the National Committee visit and support the new women's networks, but they increased their engagement and support for existing women's committees, giving women from around the regions more of an opportunity to engage at a national level.

Leadership & Membership

Such was the impact of the project that there has been a fundamental shift in the make-up of the union's sectoral leadership. At the start of the project only one of CTCP's nine sectoral federations was led by a woman. Today, that has almost been reversed, with only two now led by a man.

The union's membership was 60,000 and at the start of the project and has grown rapidly. As the report of a UNISON delegation at the end of the last year stated, not long after the project's formal end:

"One of the fastest growing FNT federations is the CTCP, the Self-Employed Workers Centre which has 85,000 members, covers 9 sectors and has 5 regional organisations."

Next steps

Although the project has already had a powerful effect on the union's structures and its external relationships, it was always intended as a pilot and pump-priming activity and CTCP will continue to use the learning materials to benefit women members and to support and encourage new women leaders, with those already trained being asked to promote the courses to colleagues or to pass on key skills themselves. CTCP are particularly keen to build on the project's transformative effect on the lives of members and their families, for instance by continuing the work to reduce the prevalence of child labour in Managua.