

## **Presidential Address – Carol Scheffer**

Thank you, dear Ana, and Cinzia. I am overwhelmed and deeply grateful for your kind words.

It is an honour for me on behalf of the Communications Workers' Union in Ireland to take up the important role of President of the UNI Europa Women's Committee. I am grateful for the honour to be your president.

My union is a relatively small union which is 75% male due to the sector that we are in. That said he have always I believe punched above our weight when it comes to promoting gender equality and in my own union, we have the best of women representing our members' issues at executive and branch level.

I have been involved in the UNI Europa Women's committee for the best part of 20 years. I knew nothing about UNI until the general secretary at the time advised me that I should attend the women's committee meeting and see what it was about.

This was to be my first ever meeting and I have never looked back since. It was also my first time in Brussels before my two boys were born and I asked my husband Christian to come with me on the trip.

On the day of the meeting, I was extremely nervous. I was very formally dressed in a two-piece suit as I thought that was what was required and because I had no idea where I was going, Christian basically dropped me off at the building and collected me afterwards a bit like a parent bringing their child to school.

In the meeting itself everyone was warm and welcoming, but I really did not have the courage to speak until the very last item on the agenda. Of course for my first meeting I was not very clear on what was going on.

The point I am making that we all must start somewhere and for me being part of the family of the UNI Europa Women's committee is perhaps the most rewarding work that I do on behalf of my union.

This would not have been possible if I did not firmly believe in the work of UNI Equal Opportunities, their achievements in progressing our agenda and ensuring that women's voices are heard.

### **Women's Representation**

Women's representation in union structures is critical for effective decision making, this goes from grass roots up to General Secretary level and we need to have more female general secretaries, not to harness power but to ensure balanced women's representation for effective decision making. There are several reasons as to why women are not taking up leadership roles.

Women are still taking on the larger portion of caring arrangements which are unpaid and undervalued. UNI has played a strategic role on the WLB directive, the right to disconnect and applied significant pressure on the European Parliament to save the Maternity Leave Directive.

The UNI Europa Women's Committee has also promoted women workers' rights in collective Global and Regional Agreements. They have ensured that lifelong learning for women and work life balance is included in collective bargaining with robust clauses on gender in these agreements.

UNI Women has also collaborated with the ETUC by being on the steering committee of the Rebalance project with best practice from our sector being included.

By adapting and contributing to these proposals there is a better opportunity to get an even balance between men and women with the caring role and for women to take on representative roles.

I also wanted to say that as women we often lack faith in own abilities. When we do achieve higher positions, we immediately under value our achievements and doubt our ability to cope. This so-called imposter syndrome regarding perceived lack of ability can lead to women abandoning well-earned positions that they believe they do not deserve. UNI Equal opportunities department encourages women to have the confidence in their skills to take up leadership roles through the mentoring programme and through various leadership initiatives.

A good recent example is the UNI Mentoring Program in Palestine which has provided women with a support framework within their unions and across the country. These networks help women learn, share experiences, and develop their potential which is key towards equal representation.

Another point that I will say about the role of women in trade unions is that we must not restrict ourselves to areas that can be seen as highly feminised. We need to participate and take an interest in the broad trade union agenda which includes industrial relations, pay bargaining, determination of working conditions and negotiating collective agreements. We must build up our experience in these areas, so that we do not become marginalised.

We know that it can be a challenge to achieve gender balance in representative structures and it will not happen overnight. Instead, it is an objective that we continue to work towards and reinforce in our unions. In that regard, Women's representation should be raised at every opportunity and at all levels both in UNI structures and in our own unions at national level.

Women's representation must be a regular feature on union agendas, particularly when women are required to participate in any union structure.

### **Domestic Violence**

The other issue I wanted to raise is around domestic violence. We know Domestic violence has always been a workplace issue and our trade unions have consistently pushed for policies to protect employees knowing the workplace is often a place of safety for women experiencing domestic abuse.

During the COVID pandemic we have seen the devastating impact of violence against women during lockdowns, with many women confined to their home with the perpetrator. It is a shame that it took the pandemic to bring the issue of domestic abuse to the fore because of the COVID reality.

The pandemic has made many women vulnerable irrespective of working from home or being at their normal place of employment. As well as domestic abuse this can also include online sexual harassment, cyber bullying, or abuse from customers.

When restrictions are lifted, we will strive for a new balance between working from home or office, so it is vital that we have long term supports in place for victims of violence. This includes developing collective agreements with employers to provide paid domestic violence leave, flexible work arrangements, counselling and other measures as deemed necessary. Employers must work with trade unions to develop workplace policies to ensure these supports are in place.

That is why we are calling on our Governments to immediately ratify ILO Convention 190 on Violence and Harassment in the World of Work. The recommendations contain measures that should be taken to mitigate the impacts of domestic violence and these must be implemented.

Victims of domestic abuse must also be given additional employment rights because no one should be dismissed or penalised because their performance has been impacted by domestic abuse. Trade union reps must be trained and well equipped to address the issue of domestic violence in the workplace and again UNI Women is at the fore with the Break the Circle Campaign.

Sisters domestic abuse is the hidden calamity that women do not want to talk about, but we can make a real difference as UNI Women by exerting pressure on our governments to ratify the convention.

## **COVID and Women**

The impact of the pandemic was not gender neutral. While many women were at the fore providing essential services, many more experienced job losses or reduced working hours while trying to combine work and family responsibilities. Those women workers in our sectors from retail to finance have made huge sacrifices to keep our economies going and the effects of the pandemic have indeed hit women hard.

Many women had to home school, carry out increased domestic responsibilities and hold down a job resulting in increased stress levels and they endured negative consequences to their WLB.

These sacrifices did not go unnoticed by UNI Women. The WLB Survey conducted by UNI Women gathered almost 5,000 replies and highlighted the impact of Covid on new forms of work and on work life balance globally.

The survey gives a snapshot of how the pandemic has changed workers' lives with 70% of respondents answering that they had been working from home during the pandemic and half having to increase their knowledge of digital skills to adjust to these new working conditions.

We know that women already experience inequalities in terms of accessing ICTS. This can include a lack of digital skills, absence of relevant content for women and the distribution and promotion of negative gender stereotypes; all which increase what is known as the "gender digital divide".

We will continue to work together to develop comprehensive strategies to protect women post COVID. This includes monitoring working conditions and ensuring that women's issues are at the heart of the collective bargaining agenda.

### **Right to Disconnect**

Trade unions have been to the fore in highlighting the impact of excessive working hours which have been a feature during COVID due to the always-on work culture and the domination of remote working.

UNI recognises that this intrusion on workers personal time had to be counteracted and they have developed an important guide on the right to disconnect not only for remote working but for all forms of work. This is particularly important for women workers to address the longstanding issue of excessive working time while sacrificing family time, personal time and so on.

The point that is being made here is that while the new world of work has been progressing in some areas it has had negative consequences in others so do engage with the UNI guidelines to protect your employment rights as well as your mental and physical health.

### **Gender and Pay**

Finally dear sisters as you know Gender pay reporting is an essential component of addressing the gender pay gap.

UNI Europa Equal Opportunitites has consulted with the European Commission on gender pay transparency measures needed at EU level. This has been done in collaboration with the ETUC and affiliates on the adoption and implementation of THE EU Directive on Pay Transparency.

This directive has been delayed and is not welcome in some quarters however it is essential to ensure our aims towards equal pay and pensions.

That said it will not succeed unless trade unions are formally included in compiling gender pay statistics. We must be a key participant at the negotiating table, and we will not support bogus employee representative groups that do not have the authority to speak on our behalf to eliminate the gap.

Trade unions have the capacity to integrate a gender perspective in collective agreements with bargaining at the heart of this. We have a comprehensive UNI statement on gender transparency so that we can strive towards equal pay for work of equal value.

## **Conclusion**

Today dear sisters I acknowledge you the women workers who are the vanguard of the trade union movement. Together we have fought consistently during the pandemic to maintain essential services.

We need a safe environment to continue this work by ensuring our Governments ratify ILO Convention 190.

We must fight for gender equality through collective bargaining which includes the needs of women workers, transgender workers while tackling health inequalities and work related illnesses.

We will promote diversity and oppose all forms of racism, homophobia and transphobia which has become prevalent. This is unacceptable as UNI promotes zero tolerance towards all forms of hate speech and discrimination.

We must ensure the right to disconnect from work and deliver robust Work life balance policies to protect women's health and family life.

UNI women will be a key part of the future world of work. This will be achieved when we work together through UNI Equal opportunities. I want to thank Veronica, Amel, Marta and Catherine for all their hard work and dedication. I also want to thank my colleagues Ana, Cinzia, Claude and Erika for all their support. I have never had the privilege of working with such a powerful group of women who are so committed to our agenda.

I also thank you delegates for your endorsement of me as your president and for your kind attention. It will be a privilege for me to work with the UNI team on your behalf.

I thank you and encourage you to keep up the good fight.

END