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by Karen Messing

Karen Messing, professor and researcher at the University of Quebec in Montreal, shared the following insights on how globalization affects women's working conditions and lives in an interview with the Women's Health Journal at the 8th International Women and Health Meeting (IWHM).

How has globalization affected women's work in developed countries?

There has been restructuring in many, many companies to cut back on expenditures. When this is done, everybody becomes frightened that they are going to lose their jobs. This is very hard on solidarity among women workers, among workers in general, because you no longer look at your co-workers as your friend and ally, but as somebody who may be able to steal your work tomorrow. The employers, of course, gain many advantages from these feelings of fear. And the women workers become isolated in a one-to-one relationship with an employer because of this tendency.

We have been working with bank tellers, a job that has been increasingly eliminated by the new forms of work. Banks are substituting machines for tellers, and they are making tellers into sales representatives for the bank and trying to take them out of unions and make them into managers.

But they are not really managers, they are just non-unionized, lonely workers who are being told that this is a way to become independent. There has been great resistance by the unions to this, but it's another effect of the broadening of the global market, the globalization of banks in general.

Sewing machine operators, for example, have also been very much affected by globalization. There has

been a movement away from unionized labor into home work, working in the home for an employer. The possibility for women to organize among themselves is being lost. This is a very serious problem for many women workers. Office work is also tending to be done more at home. There is a greater tendency for telework and this, again, is a way that women become isolated from each other and unable to fight for conditions and less protected in terms of health and safety.

Many women, particularly in the South but also in the North, are working in very marginal jobs. Sometimes they work at home for an employer, but they never see any other women workers. They are marginalized in their place of work. Sometimes, women have jobs in offices, but men have jobs in factories, so there are few women and many men and the women are lost when it's time to negotiate the collective agreement. The collective agreement is negotiated for the men, and the women are just forgotten or they are negotiated in the last minute.

How, then, can women workers protect themselves?

In many situations, it's very hard for women to develop any kind of bargaining position where they can gain any rights. There are different strategies that have been attempted in different places to deal with this. In Quebec, we are lucky because there has been, for some time, an alliance between the women's movement and the women's committees in the trade unions. The women's committees in the major trade unions have been unable to speak to each other, and this has been really important because trade unions sometimes are in competition with one another. Sometimes they don't

speak to one another; sometimes they are even hurtful to one another. But the women's committees have always been able to keep an open communication, and that has been very important. By these means, they have been able to keep the union open, to some extent, to the rest of the women's movement and to the networks for women's health, and they have been able to contact women in the women's committees in the trade unions. These alliances have allowed things like negotiating maternity leave or leaves when women have abortions, which was a very complicated thing to negotiate

alliances with the women's movement. And finally, there have been questions of women's integration in the life of the unions themselves, and these have been facilitated by strong women's committees as well. There have been a lot of problems because women in the women's movement tend to be very hostile towards trade unions and think that women in trade unions are automatically subject to the domination of men. But this is not always the case, and sometimes there is incomprehension on both sides of the role that each can play.

never see it, she may never hear it, but she cannot be called at work. This was a terrible source of anxiety for women, but it is not something that men would bring up. So we get women-centered concerns.

What is the balance of work hours to pay for women and men in developed countries?

In Canada, we read from the official government statistics that women and men work the same number of hours, but men are paid for a much greater proportion of those hours. The figures that I have seen show that women have paid work on the average of 6 hours a day and about 2.2 hours a day of domestic work. The men have 7.3 hours a day of paid work and 0.9 hours a day for domestic work or other work. That is the official statistic. We did studies with a French researcher, and their men were working less than 5 hours a week in any domestic work, farm work or other paid work or any work other than their principal paid job. The women were averaging 21 hours. That is a big difference.

It's very hard [to calculate work hours] because, as women tell us, work is not just about visible work. Women include the thinking, the planning, the getting ready to do work, not doing something because she's doing something else like taking a minute here to make a phone call, another minute to get the laundry. So it gets much bigger. It's very hard to calculate. Many studies seem to say that men and women are approaching each other in the proportion of domestic work, but when we talk to women it is very clear that the responsibility is almost always on women.

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How are the needs of women workers different from those of men and how do you, as a researcher, discover these needs?

We think, and this is based on feminist research generally, that we have to start from the questions asked by women workers, the concerns they have expressed. When we do our research project, as the very first step, we see those who represent the women in the union and the group of women workers. We ask them to select some informants who are experts. These represent the different categories of women, that is, married women, women with children, older women and so forth. Then we speak with them to find out what their priorities are, and these are usually very different from things said by men because men have different jobs, different lives.

One important theme that is always coming up is the issue of family. Family life is not respected in many companies. For example, our telephone operators told us one of their biggest problems is that they are not allowed to use the telephone. They can't receive calls, and they can't make calls. If their child is sick and the day care center calls them and says you must come immediately because your child is sick, the employer will post a public notice on a bulletin board. The women may



Lito Ocampo

Globalization has locked women in tedious, backbreaking work; in this case, while men watch over their backs.

because Quebec is Catholic. There was a lot of difficulty with the idea of abortion and, because the women's committees wanted to negotiate for leaves for abortion in the same way that they negotiate for maternity leaves, as a way of speaking about abortion in the union, it was quite complicated.

There have been struggles for equal pay for equal work, and these struggles have also been facilitated by