

fighting an Uphill Battle

by Mavic Cabrera-Balleza

Irene Xavier, president of Sahabat Wanita, Malaysia's only national organisation of women workers speaks of the challenges in union organising amongst women

Irene Xavier was born in a small town in the north of Malaysia. As a student, she got involved in the protest campaign against the proposed University and Colleges Act in 1972 that threatened the autonomy of the university. The Act would give the Education Minister the power to appoint the chancellors and the deans who would in turn decide on the composition of the faculty. Most threatening however was the fact that the Act would get rid of the students' union and the right of the students to elect the student council. Moreover, the students as well as the faculty would be prohibited from participating in political activities. The protests became so big and organised that there was a crackdown on the student body leadership. Despite the protests, the Act was passed anyway. For Irene, that initiation to the protest movement was an experience that dictated the political path she would take from then on.

The experience in student activism led to Irene's involvement with workers in the electronics industry. She started by assisting the workers in setting up cooperatives. As an advocate for workers' rights, Irene was exposed to the broad range of issues confronting the workers. At the time, she says, her involvement was not in any way focused on the women workers' issues. It was not until she was asked to organise women workers' cooperatives that Irene began to realise how women are discriminated against even in supposedly progressive political groups. Since then, she has concentrated on organising women workers and advocating for their rights.

Following are excerpts of Mavic Cabrera-Balleza's interview with Irene Xavier, President of Sahabat Wanita, the only national organisation of women workers in Malaysia.

Q: Tell us about Sahabat Wanita and how it started.

A: Sahabat Wanita means "friends of women" in Bahasa Malaysia. It grew out of the students' efforts to organise among the workers in the electronics industry in a free-trade zone in Sungaywang, near Kuala Lumpur. At the time, the workers had been employed for more than five years in factories that had pioneer status. Pioneer status prohibits workers from forming a trade union for the first five years of operation. It is granted by the Malaysian government to foreign companies who invest in free-trade zones. As the five-year period was coming to an end, we felt that it was time to start trade union organising. The workers were exposed to a lot of hazardous chemicals and very high noise levels. The other significant problem was the cyclical pattern of retrenchment every five to eight years.

We found out that while the unfair labour practices affected everyone in the factories, they were harshest on the women, who had the least education and the lowest-level jobs. The poor physical working conditions were most difficult for them to bear. So we decided to focus on them.

Q: What is the objective of Sahabat Wanita?

A: We organise women workers to enable them to form their own trade unions. We encourage them to lead the trade unions they form and address issues that specifically affect women.

But this is really an uphill battle, primarily because the government doesn't allow free unionism. Workers are forced to join unions that already exist, if they exist at all. If you don't have a union covering you then you don't have a union. In the electronics industry for example,

workers are not allowed to form a national union, they have to stick to the existing ones. The most you can settle for is a company union. And even company unions are having so much trouble. There was one that took six years to be recognised as a trade union by the company, six years and a long legal battle. After winning the battle they could not sign the first collective bargaining agreement because the company just didn't want to sign.

Secondarily, it's difficult because the so-called progressive trade unionists fear that by forming a women's union, we are dividing workers. So we have to struggle with them as well as with the government.

Q: Are the ones that exist company unions?

A: Actually we have quite a number of big national trade unions. But these are unions that have survived government pressures on them not to be radical, not to push hard for workers' issues. For example, it is only now that they are raising the issue of minimum wage. In the early 1970s and 1980s, when we were demanding to have a minimum wage these same unions were saying no because according to them, this demand would scare away foreign investors. It's the same thing with the issue of overtime. We asked the unions why the workers must do so much overtime to take home a reasonable pay package. But these unions say overtime is good—if workers want higher pay, then they should work more. As if the workers are not already working hard enough and as if the workers' lives only revolve around the factory. These unions tend to focus only on bread- and-butter issues and of course within that there's no place for women's issues. We want to organise an alternative type of union, where there's more democracy, where there's more participation, where women lead and make decisions.

Q: The trade unions that you are talking about are mixed unions, meaning there are women and men members, but I suppose the majority are men?

A: There are unions where most members are

male but there are also many others where most are women. But in all of them, the leadership is always male-dominated. Women comprise only about 8 percent of the leadership.

Q: What are the specific issues of women workers in Malaysia?

A: Women's productive and reproductive issues are so intertwined. These include childcare support, health, sexual harassment, and upward mobility in the workplace. The sad thing here is that these are not considered workers' issues at all even by the trade unions. But recently, because of so much pressure from women's groups for the government and civil society to subscribe to the Beijing Platform for Action, the issue of sexual harassment in the workplace is being included in the workers' agenda. These are not new things, however. Women workers were already demanding an end to sexual harassment even during colonial times. In the 1940s, women plantation workers staged a strike to protest sexual harassment.



Irene in one of the many workshops that Sahabat Wanita organises for women workers

Q: There is a growing trend towards flexibilisation of labour in Asia...is this also true for Malaysia? And in what ways?

A: Yes. Flexibilisation came to Malaysia in many ways. First as privatisation. Then in the form of contractualisation. And in fact there are many areas where women are contractualised first, in the government service for example. Whenever they privatise any government corporation, the first sector that gets privatised is the cleaning services and this would involve women. Increasingly, a lot of work has been subcontracted to women to do at home, the most common of which is in the garment industry. I know one community where women actually just cut off the extra threads that join the clothes for Barbie dolls on a piece-rate basis. Big factories such as Hitachi practice contractualisation by sending parts of electronic appliances to agents who in turn recruit people to assemble these parts in their small workshops. So you have a small factory sometimes employing less than 100—mainly women, who are paid very low wages because they are

considered rural workers doing very labour-intensive phases of production. The small factories are dependent on the bigger factories giving them contracts. When the contracts expire, the workers lose their jobs. Because of the recent recession, many big factories reduced production and as a result, the smaller factories have closed down.

Q: Apart from lower wages what are the other concrete impacts of contractualisation on women?

A: There is no job security and they do not have many of the benefits that the employment law provides for—health and maternity benefits for example.

Many of these women are in their 40s or late 30s and they have come out of plantations which have been sold. They cannot read and write English nor do they have other skills that the market demands. So they find it hard to get employed anywhere. The only option then is to be cleaners or to work in the small factories.

Q: What are the other programmes and services of Sahabat Wanita?

A: Apart from organising, we also conduct training, and from time to time, lobbying. But we don't have the resources to really focus on lobbying. That's why we work through networks like the Women's Agenda for Change. Some of the training seminars that we conduct have to do with understanding and using the laws, health and safety, and self-organising...like if you don't have a union, how do you organise alternatively?

At the moment, we are also involved in helping women workers understand the electoral processes and to participate in demanding changes that people are asking for. Women workers appear to be the most conservative of voters at this point. I don't blame them, because they don't see the electoral process as helping them in any way. So they probably will be conservative in their vote and elect the existing government. We want them to look at the possibility of change in their situation, if there is a new government, if the women's candidate is elected for example.

Q: Are you also organising women in the informal sector? How?

A: We are involved with women doing domestic work. In fact a lot of them used to work on plantations but had to find jobs as domestic workers because the plantations have closed. We have been trying to get their work protected by the labour laws, but we haven't met much success.

Q: There are migrant women workers here working as domestics, most of them Filipinos and Indonesians. How is Sahabat Wanita coordinating with this particular sector of women workers?

A: We are not organising them directly, but refer them to Tenaganita, another women's NGO. What we do is bridge the gap between the Malaysian workers and the foreign workers. Most Malaysian domestic workers are a bit

hostile to the foreign workers because they feel that these are depressing wages since they offer their services at much lower rates. They also do a lot of chores that Malaysians refuse to do. A Malaysian domestic worker for example will not bathe the dog but a Filipino or an Indonesian will do this very willingly.

So we try to educate Malaysian workers about the issues, and show them

that the migrant women workers are a very exploited group, much more than them and that we should be in solidarity. So in areas where we work, this had had an effect. A number of cases of employer abuse have actually been taken up by Malaysian domestic workers. They take the migrants to see the right persons, go to the right institutions and in many ways, help them solve their problems. Overall, in the areas where we work, some level of solidarity has been achieved between migrant women workers and the Malaysian domestic workers.

Q: Is this level of solidarity also manifested in national unions?

A: No. I don't think that solidarity exists. In fact the trade unions have taken a very on- and-off attitude. Sometimes they do support foreign workers and raise their issues but sometimes



Speaking at a trade union congress

they would say, “no, send them back home.”

The same ambivalence is evident on gender issues. Not long ago, we were trying to put together the *People’s Manifesto*, a document that consolidates the demands of the various sectors for change, and again one of the things we said was equal conditions and salaries for workers, women and men, local or foreign. Right there and then, there were groups who objected to the foreign workers. So again we had to dialogue and explain why the migrant workers should have the same benefits that Malaysian workers are getting.

Q: What is the Woman’s Development Collective and how do you coordinate your work in Sahabat Wanita with the Collective?

A: The Women’s Development Collective (WDC) is a coalition of nine women leaders supporting NGOs in their grassroots work. Right now, it is concentrating on developing a training institute for women. Some of the training courses they conduct are on gender and feminist analysis and leadership and organising. We coordinate with them in conducting training on occupational health and safety, and understanding and using the laws. WDC and Sahabat Wanita are part of a group of women’s NGOs that formulated the “Women’s Agenda for Change,” a lobbying document that calls for policy changes and action to strengthen the goal of gender equality and sustainable development. We in Sahabat Wanita brought in the issue of women workers and made sure that it is accurately reflected in the agenda.

Q: I understand that you are also part of the Women’s Candidacy Initiative (WCI). Can you tell us more about it?

A: The WCI is another coalition of women’s organisations that aim to promote awareness among all Malaysians, the women especially, of their rights and power in a democratic process of elections and parliamentary representation. For the coming elections, we are fielding a woman candidate to run as an independent on a broad women’s platform. Specific to women workers’ issues, our candidate will take up not only the usual concerns such as occupational health and safety and sexual harassment in the workplace but also the recent spate of harassments in urban poor communities where most women workers live. Right now, the women and their

families face the possibility of being evicted by force and the police are becoming more violent. They bring tear gas into the communities, even when women and children stand in front, they just spray them with tear gas, they bring huge dogs, chase them away. Whenever there’s an eviction, it’s the women who don’t get to go to work, it’s the women who have to manage with the children in the tents—yes, they live in the tents, and it’s the women who have to somehow manage the food. It’s also the women who are responsible for raising funds for the evicted families. We would like to surface these issues that most political parties just seem to gloss over.

Q: There is an ongoing review of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and governments, women’s NGOs and other members of civil society across the world are assessing how the Platform has been implemented. How do you think the Malaysian government has fared in terms of honoring the commitments it made when it signed the BPFA?

A: It has certainly not honored its commitments. But the government keeps saying that it has been good to women and it has done quite a number of things for women. And now, because of a big possibility of losing the coming elections, it is pushing for the reform of the guardianship law, to give women guardianship over their children. At present the law stipulates that only men could be legal guardians. This is an issue that women have been raising all along. But I would also like to stress that the kinds of laws the government is trying to improve are laws that affect middle-class women. It’s still not addressing issues that affect working-class women. I really don’t think it is taking the BPFA into consideration when it formulates policies on women.

Q: Is there anything more that you would like to tell our readers?

A: I think the issue of women workers is a very difficult one because in the labour movement the women are marginalised or their issues are not raised. In the women’s movement their issues are not raised either or they are not given prominence. Women workers get the short deal in these two big movements. It’s actually a very difficult struggle. ♪