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# LRS

## LABOUR RESEARCH SERVICE

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# YOUNG WOMEN OPENING DOORS CREATING SPACES!

## The Decisions for Life Trade Union Campaign

The Labour Research Service reflects on participating in the Campaign, the lessons learnt and future challenges in organising young women into the trade union movement

*The „Decisions for Life,“ (DFL) Trade Union Campaign is a campaign targeting young women in the service sector between the ages of 15-29 and is part of the Decent Work, Decent Life for Women Campaign. The DFL is coordinated by the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in cooperation with UNI Global Union, the University of Amsterdam and the NGO Wage Indicator. The Campaign includes federations and service sector unions in South Africa, Angola, Mozambique, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Brazil, India, Indonesia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Ukraine.*

*In South Africa the Labour Research Service is assisting with the coordination of the Campaign and in this article we reflect on our experiences of working in the campaign, the lessons learnt and the challenges trade union activists face in recruiting and organising young women into the trade union movement.*



## **I. What is the working world that young women are entering?**

The onset of a prolonged economic crisis in 2008 has seen a deepening of gender inequalities in the society and in turn within the workplace. From our experience of the Decisions for Life Campaign in South Africa, the majority of young women leaving school are faced with the bleak prospect of unemployment or low paid, part-time and insecure jobs in sectors like retail, hospitality, cleaning and call centres. A young woman entering any one of these sectors is likely to face discrimination on the basis of her age, her gender and in many cases her race, even if in South Africa we have laws in place protecting workers against discrimination. As a young person the challenges of inexperience, limited workplace networks, lack of knowledge of labour rights or trade union work involvement and cultural practices where young people and more particularly young women have very little decision making power - can all play a role in disempowering a young person entering the workplace. Young women in particular are also faced with fixed notions of their gender roles for e.g. they need to be feminine, attractive, sweet, and always willing to look after the needs of others.

Young women are seen as the cheap labour to fill for example the positions in call centres where jobs are organised into long poorly paid shifts, or into casinos and hotels where sexual harassment is rife or into shops and malls where they have little protection against dismissal. As the pressure for profitability intensifies the working conditions in these services sectors are deteriorating. Employer obligations like maternity protection, family responsibility leave, health protection, overtime payment, safe and secure transport, occupational health and safety measures and skills development are areas being ignored or severely compromised. Working in this environment leaves workers extremely vulnerable and for young women workers this vulnerability increases with the discrimination they experience being young and being a woman.



The economic crisis has also seen the state cutting back on its obligations to provide public services like effective childcare and educational facilities, safe and accessible public transport and appropriate health care facilities. For young women workers, many of whom are single parents, breadwinners and care givers to extended families, the State neglecting its responsibility has added a tremendous burden on to them. Young women leave for work not always sure that their children will be properly cared for and often return from working shifts late at night in unsafe forms of transport where they are at the mercy of taxi owners who have very little regard for the safety of their passengers. When family members or children fall ill, it is also often the young women who are forced to stay home from work to perform the care giving roles.

***Through the Decisions for Life Campaign we have gained a deeper insight into the levels of stress, anxiety, fear and often despair that young women workers confront daily. Through the Campaign we have brought together groups of young women who have expressed hope, enthusiasm and energy both individually and collectively - and this is the story that we would like to share.***

## 2. The LRS Gender Programme helps inform the Decisions for Life Trade Union Campaign

Over the past few years the LRS has implemented programmes contributing to the empowerment of women in the workplace and the inclusion of gender standards into collective bargaining. In 2007 the LRS completed a baseline study that helped us better understand the barriers and challenges that women workers face and assisted in gauging where gender issues fit within collective bargaining. This study laid the foundation for the development of new approaches for creating a more women friendly environment in the workplace and trade union and strategies for inclusion of gender standards in collective bargaining.

Through an engagement with a partner organisation *Gender at Work*<sup>1</sup> we were able to frame some of our learning's emerging from this study. Key to this is that the struggle for gender equality in the trade union and workplace needs changes at multiple levels i.e. changes in the individual consciousness of both men and women, shifts in women's access to resources and leadership positions and at a more systemic level changes in trade union and workplace policy as well as a process of transforming the norms and culture of the way both the trade union and workplace operate. What we were finding through our research work was that often including gender standards focussed on specific areas e.g. getting women into leadership positions or developing gender policies at the expense of a more holistic approach that would challenge gender inequalities at all the different levels from individual to systemic.

Combined with projects focussing on the gendered nature of HIV/AIDS, trade union culture change and later a focus on young women workers through the Decisions For Life Campaign, the LRS Gender Programme has moved beyond a narrow research focus to the establishment of a creative, dynamic and interactive engagement in social movement building, that has strengthened our capacity to engage with the labour movement<sup>2</sup> through participatory research and empowerment programmes.

Through engagement and collaborative work with trade unions, women's groups and partner organisations we have developed some key working principles that shape our Gender Programme. These principles have been informed by an LRS vision where women and particularly women in more vulnerable forms of employment need to be their own agents of change, that reproductive work, essential for maintaining society needs to be the responsibility of both men and women and that collective bargaining the engine of the trade union movement needs to play a key role in addressing the gender inequalities working women experience.



### 2.1 “Quality of life demands” on the Collective Bargaining Agenda

All LRS Programmes have a focus on the need to take into account the importance of “quality of life” or “non-wage” issues particularly in relation to women in the Collective Bargaining Agenda.

1 .....  
www.gendematwok.org

2 LRS External Evaluation for EED (November 2009)

More Collective Bargaining Agreements taking into account issues like maternity protection, childcare facilities and family responsibilities would show respect for women's time and multiple roles and recognise that workers are social beings with families. While these Agreements are important at a trade union policy level they are also important in helping to change men's consciousness and practice in relation to their partners and families.

## 2.2 Building women's self-esteem and voice



Central to our work has been the recognition that women workers both individually and collectively need the space, opportunity, trust, compassion, support and a non-judgemental environment to develop the confidence to raise their concerns and to take action to improve their lives. As part of our practice we encourage women to create spaces where they feel safe to reflect on their own actions as well as the broader societal challenges they face. In this way women have access to a resource "their own space", a resource they normally have difficulty accessing in their work, home or trade union lives. Through a range of methods e.g. writing, conversations, workshops etc. we encourage women to value the shifts in their individual consciousness and the confidence to publically express how these shifts in consciousness can lead them to take action.

## 2.3 Working Women - Recognising both productive and reproductive work

Paid and unpaid work is a feature of the lives of most working women. The unpaid or reproductive work that mostly takes place in the home is an important bridge between employed, unemployed and informally employed women and is a feature of the broader gender oppression women experience. Reproductive work is seen as women's work and this is entrenched by all the institutions in society, the workplace and trade union being no exception. In our work as the LRS we are attempting to raise both men and women's consciousness and practice in both their private and public lives. At a public level, workplace and trade union policies on childcare, paternity leave and family responsibility leave can go some way in shifting gender roles on reproductive labour but for real gender equality to take place these shifts have to be seen and experienced in the daily roles and responsibilities men and women carry out. Shifts in these roles and responsibilities at a private level is often a lot more difficult to implement - but we see it as central to changing consciousness and impacting on the patriarchal culture that entrenches reproductive labour as women's work.

## 2.4 Marginalised women workers become union members

Developing organisational approaches for recruiting, mobilising and organising women in outsourced and casual forms of employment, seasonal women workers, domestic workers and young women in vulnerable forms of employment, is one of the key challenges of our LRS work. Part of our participatory research work has been to work with organisations who are attempting to address these challenges and then to assist in generalising the lessons that are emerging from these experiences. In many cases this work needs a rethinking of our existing trade union organisational forms. For example young women employed as casual labour have very specific concerns about job security, sexual harassment and very often the undermining of their personal dignity. In our experience of engaging with young women workers, existing formal trade union spaces are not always seen as affirming or spaces that take into account the competing demands they

face as young women. Our participatory research focuses tapping into the creative energy and strength of young women who are formulating the kinds of spaces, demands and organisational forms they see as relevant and necessary.

### 2.5 Our research and educational methodologies

Through on going joint work and collaboration with our constituency and partner organisations as well as internal training we are constantly questioning our practice and striving for innovative, participatory and feminist popular research and educational methodologies that will build and strengthen organisation. In 2008 LRS partnered with Gender atWork to develop approaches that deal with the organisational challenges involved in building gender equality and the strengthening of women's platforms in organisations. Through this partnership the LRS Gender Programme staff learnt a great deal about hearing and understanding women's voices as a resource for developing organisational strategies.



### 3. The LRS joins the DFL Campaign

Two years ago in March 2009 representatives from the 4 South African trade union federations together with service sector unions affiliated to UNI<sup>3</sup> met to officially launch the Decisions for Life Trade Union Campaign. For the representatives at the March workshop there was a sense of excitement and anticipation. "Decisions for Life" to most of us seemed an unusual name for a trade union campaign - but a name that seemed to offer the possibility of connecting to all the aspects of our lives as women, as throughout our lives we are making decisions, some positive and affirming but many others that we often wish we could later change. The Decisions for Life Trade Union Campaign's focus on young women workers in the service sector between the ages of 15 and 29 offered us, the more middle age, Gender Coordinators an exciting opportunity to connect with a largely neglected layer in the trade unions i.e. young women workers and young women seeking employment. Targeting young women in the service sector also meant that with this campaign we would be connecting with women in some of the most vulnerable and exploited forms of employment e.g. call centres, retail stores, shopping malls, house-keepers from hotels, young women involved in informal service related work etc.

The DFL started with a launch in Johannesburg in August 2009 and since then launches have taken place in the cities of Cape Town in the Western Cape, Polokwane in Limpopo and Durban in Kwa-Zulu Natal. Each Province has a Campaign Coordinating team made up of young women workers and officials from COSATU, FEDUSA, NACTU and CONSAWU, the 4 trade union federations operating in South Africa. The Campaign Coordinating teams acts as the engine of the Campaign and organises meetings, workshops, workplace events and recruitment, awareness, mobilising and organising activities.

As the LRS we play a coordinating role- a role that we have very much enjoyed over the past 2 years and a role that has assisted us a great deal in learning about recruiting and organising young women workers and young women seeking employment.

## 4. Sharing our Campaign Methodology



Building a campaign is about creating a movement of people who have the consciousness, energy, enthusiasm, skills, resources, knowledge and approach to make a change. In the case of the Decisions for Life Trade Union Campaign, the change is twofold: on the one hand it is recruiting and organising young women in the services sector into the trade union movement so as to assist them in addressing the workplace inequalities they experience, while on the other hand the Campaign is about ensuring that the ideas, policies and practice in the trade union movement creates a “young women friendly” environment. A “young women friendly” trade union environment is about challenging the existing patriarchal culture in the trade union i.e. addressing the unequal gender power relations where young women workers are dominated by both men as well as older women in the union.

As the LRS together with the Decisions for Life Trade Union activists we are building a campaign methodology where we aim to integrate consciousness raising, recruitment and organising as part of the broader struggle against oppressive gender relations in the workplace, trade union and society more generally.

Our campaign methodology is evolving through the sharing of the accumulated experiences of trade union gender activists who have for years been struggling with patriarchal power relations in the workplace and trade union and the experiences of the LRS Gender Programme.

### 4.1 Young women creating “safe spaces”

The Campaign Coordinating Team meetings, the engine of the Campaign, have been constructed as “safe spaces” - spaces where young women workers and officials from different trade unions and federations are all the time working towards developing “codes of good practice” codes that in the words of a SACCAWU official focuses on “treating everyone with respect”. Respect, a much taken for granted concept is one of the key hurdles that young women entering or finding themselves in the workplace are faced with. The discrimination that young women experience because of their age and gender are often the tools used to destroy their confidence and silence them. Recruiting young women into the union movement means working alongside them to break their silence build their self-esteem and strengthen their resolve to take action against the injustices they experience. Fighting against injustices is never “safe” or “comfortable” and the creation of “safe spaces” is not about shifting from this struggle, rather it is about having the space to role model behaviours, actions and practices that we aim to implement in our workplaces, trade unions and communities.

*“A safe space is a space where one can talk freely knowing that people will not judge you. An environment where one opens up and shares with the group her fears, challenges and achievements trusting that it will not leave the space (in a harmful way)... DFL monthly meetings became a safe space for young women to open up. It feels like home.”<sup>4</sup>*



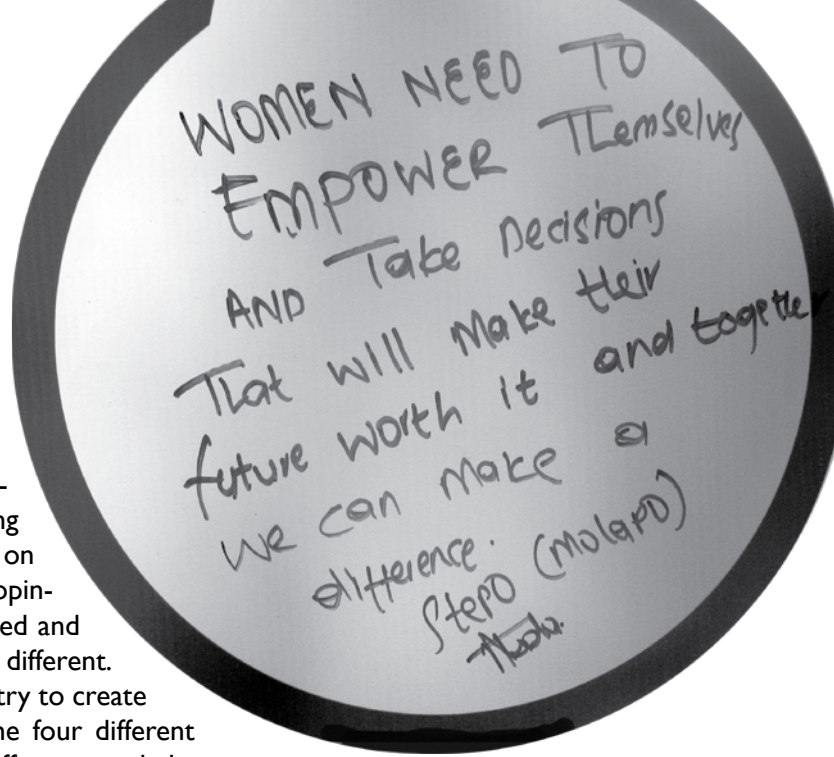
“Not being judged” for many of the young women is important in sustaining their involvement in the campaign. The young women feel that they live in a world filled with judgement, judgement about their abilities and skills, their attitudes, their life styles, their choices etc. - and all of this judgement silences them and makes them experience their lives as without value. “Not being judged” is not equal to “everyone agreeing on everything”, but rather it is about different opinions being listened to, heard, respected, valued and not assumed to be wrong because they are different.

In Decisions for Life Campaign activities we try to create the opportunity for young women from the four different federations, the different unions and the different workplaces to speak about both their challenges but also their strategies which are often very context specific linked to their workplace, trade union policies, political history etc. An important practical technique to encourage a more open, sharing and non-judgemental approach is the rotating of meeting venues as in the case of the Johannesburg Campaign Team or having a “neutral” venue as in the case of the Cape Town Campaign Team. Rotating venues between different federations and trade unions with different political histories and traditions has allowed young woman to be part of physical spaces they would ordinarily not have visited. Being in the physical space and experiencing the hospitality of an “opposition” trade union, has gone a long way in affirming the common challenges and strategies that young are engaged in while respectfully recognising the organisational differences that might exist.

*“In these meetings there is a lack of surveillance”* is the way one of the young women workers in the Campaign describes the Decisions for Life activities. Many of the young women feel that they are constantly being watched both in the workplace as well as in the union and the people doing the watching are usually men in powerful positions. Sometimes the watching has overt sexual connotations but very often it is a more subtle form of judgement and in turn control. The creation of “safe spaces” which in most cases are “women only spaces” serves to provide young women with a space free from the watchful eyes of those who constantly expect them to prove their worth, and allows them the freedom to express their opinions, ideas and dreams and most importantly strengthens their sense of self belief.

A “safe space” is also about having the physical, emotional, social and psychological freedom to challenge one’s own roles, assumptions and behaviours as a young woman. One of the techniques we have used is a set of Tai chi and relaxation exercises, drawn from Capacitar. The Gender at Work website describes the role of the Capacitar exercises in the following way

- Creates a safe space in which everyone can challenge their own roles, assumptions and behaviours
- Opens people to themselves and others, building tolerance, trust, acceptance and forgiveness
- Enables women to value themselves, helps them see how they have internalized gender roles, and opens them to the possibilities of their own self-empowerment
- People who have been abused begin to reconnect to their bodies, and begin to accept appropriate touch from people who touch in a safe, respectful way<sup>5</sup>



5 <http://www.genderatwork.org/mind-body-and-spirit-methodology>

We try to start most of the activities with a set of exercises. In these few moments participants are left with their own thoughts and through the focus on their bodies they seem to gain a new energy, focus and sense of collective strength.

*"I cannot imagine us not doing the exercises - it makes me feel so much better and I think that we are able to change the atmosphere in the room."*<sup>6</sup>



Introducing the Capacitar exercises was at first seen as a very unusual feature in a "union meeting" but very soon everyone accepted it as part of our Decisions for Life practice. The time and space created for a more reflective moment in an otherwise extremely busy life style is seen as being important in assisting participants to be more calm, thoughtful and caring about their own contribution as well as the contributions of others. Using the Capacitar exercises regularly has provided something of a ritual at the beginning of the meetings, a ritual that helps participants to feel present, more focussed, able to express both their joy and sadness and generally to connect to the power within themselves. "I cried for the first time in front of people. I am always in control but I let go and it felt much better"<sup>7</sup>

The Decisions for Life International Campaign has put the reconciliation of personal and working life very high on the trade union agenda.<sup>8</sup> In our "safe spaces" we try to use techniques that can both raise consciousness about the need to reconcile this work life balance as well as place value on both identities. At the beginning of a meeting, participants are asked to reflect on what they have left behind them (often at home) to attend the meeting and what they are bringing with them (often their work experience). This simple exercise helps participants to be more fully present in the meeting. It also however, immediately enables participants to make connections between home and work and gives home-life a recognised and valued place. Participants then feel more valued and as if more than one identity (work-role) is allowed to be present.<sup>9</sup> Feeling that all the identities are present and valued is an important step in recognising their power but also at the same time recognising the injustice of the unequal distribution of both productive and reproductive work. This recognition is not from the position of being a victim but rather as an active, powerful agent who is extremely important in the functioning of society and who therefore has the power to struggle against injustices.

"Safe spaces" or women only spaces are often described by male counterparts in the unions as separatist and undemocratic. The Decisions for Life Campaign in South Africa is sometimes criticised for focussing on young women at the expense of young men. Over the past 2 years the Campaign has revealed the many challenges that young workers face, but it has also revealed the very particular challenges facing young women workers especially those in the more vulnerable forms of employment in the service sector. Our creation of "safe spaces" has been to help facilitate a process of empowerment, a process which as far as possible can hold values and practices

6 Johannesburg Campaign Team Member (12 April 2011)

7 Participant at Johannesburg Campaign Coordinating meeting (1 April 2011)

8 Decisions for Life Booklet, ITUC 2011

9 LRS External Evaluation for EED (November 2009)

that allow young women to flourish- even if this is at the expense of men feeling offended at not getting preferential treatment.

As the LRS Gender Programme we have recognised that for changes in consciousness as well as deep cultural changes within the trade union to take place, men will need to be engaged about their “sense of offence” at campaigns like the DFL that targets only young women. This engagement cannot only focus on confrontation and we will need to create spaces where men are also able to voice their fears and dreams while recognising their privilege in relation to women.

#### 4.2 Building personal and collective power

*“First you stand up for yourself and then you are better able to stand up for others”*<sup>10</sup> This quote from one of the trade union members participating in the Campaign is a commonly held view amongst the young women in the Campaign.

The Decisions for Life Campaign is about young women making decisions, making choices and for this to happen young women need to be empowered. Empowerment in this context means the power to act - in relation to the oppression and domination they experience individually as women, in relation to the oppression and domination they experience as a group in society and in relation to the oppression and domination exercised by institutions in society. Developing the power to act is not a linear process, with one fixed starting or end point. In the Campaign we attempt to create spaces and conditions where each person develops the ability to act - by both reflecting on and locating their own personal experiences within the broader institutional power relations as well as choosing how they wish to respond to these power relations in their personal lives, work and trade union context and within the broader society. So through the creation of “safe spaces” consciousness raising activities, skills development processes, campaigns to change the lives of young women and on-going struggles to deal with patriarchal power relations, in the Decisions for Life Campaign we see ourselves as building power, *“Power as the ability to empower and transform oneself, others, and the world”*<sup>11</sup> and for many of the young women personal growth is an important key in this process of transformation.

Young women in the campaign express a sense of self-awareness and personal growth *“I can now stand my ground, even if they put me down”*.<sup>12</sup> This self-awareness and personal growth is experienced within the collective experience of the campaign, a collective experience that attempts to integrate personal growth, autonomy and self-reliance with a broader clarity of purpose, consciousness of power relations and willingness to act. *“I am now organising young women with a purpose. This is not about just wearing the t-shirt. Before recruitment was an obligation, now I feel I have a bigger purpose - a purpose to assist other young women, other young women like me”*.<sup>13</sup>



As the campaign grows more and more of the young women are able to articulate and value this personal development as being integrally linked to the collective energy, enthusiasm and struggle to empower women to transform unequal gender relations.

10 South African DFL Participant at Maputo Conference (March 2010)  
11 Allan, A (2005) Feminist Perspectives on Power in website [http://www.ppgneim.ffch.ufba.br/\\_ARQ/Bull39.6\\_Cecilia.pdf](http://www.ppgneim.ffch.ufba.br/_ARQ/Bull39.6_Cecilia.pdf)  
12 Participant at Johannesburg Campaign Coordinating Meeting (12 April 2011)  
13 Union organiser at Johannesburg Campaign Coordinating Meeting (12 April 2011)

*“I want to thank the union for introducing me to this (DFL) campaign. Before it was difficult for me to speak out but through the union and the Decisions for Life Campaign I learnt about issues like sexual harassment, issues that many young women face and this helped me to understand my own situation. I have also taken big decisions in my personal life. I decided to separate from my fiancé and to start living as a single parent”<sup>14</sup>*

These young women who are taking important decisions in their private and public lives are important role models and through the campaign we are creating platforms and spaces where as role models they can play an important role in providing other young women with the inspiration, confidence and knowledge to make informed decisions about their own lives.

## **5. Campaigns strengthening young women’s ability to take decisions**



Our practical campaign activity over the past 2 years has evolved out of discussions on the needs of young women workers and has been shaped by the principles and methodologies described in this paper. In the Campaign Coordinating teams and Decisions for Life forums in the trade unions, young women workers have spoken about their lives at work, in the union and in their homes. Through these engagements we identified the following key campaign areas: the sexual and reproductive rights of young women, young women’s rights in the workplace, empowering young women seeking employment and empowering young women through writing, and cultural activities.

### **5.1 Sexual and Reproductive Rights**

Our focus at the start of the campaign was on freeing young women workers to tell their stories in their own words, emphasising what they saw as important. The telling of stories and how it was listened to and valued was one tool for young women to take ownership of the campaign, to set the agenda and to create a “code of conduct” where respectfully listening and questioning was encouraged. A recurring theme throughout many of the stories was the physical vulnerability young women experience. In many of the stories there were examples of sexual harassment or just a sense of lack of power and control over their own bodies. With SACCAWU leading, sexual harassment became one of the cornerstones of the campaign. The sexual harassment campaign included awareness raising and the creation of “safe spaces” for young women to speak about their own fears and experiences. Practical strategies to combat sexual harassment emerged through these discussions. The sexual harassment discussions played an important role in creating a collective consciousness about “me and my body” and how important it is for the process of empowerment for young women to feel safe, secure and proud of “my body”.

The development of the campaign with the slogan “My right to choose a femidom’, was another important step in the process of young women becoming aware of the power they have in taking control of their bodies. In a workshop at the beginning of 2010 a NGO “Supportworldwide”

demonstrated how female condoms are used and through discussions helped to dispel some of the myths surrounding the femidom. Young women workers at the workshop were extremely excited about using the femidoms and much of the discussion that followed the demonstration focussed on how to negotiate this with their partners. From this workshop a number of initiatives followed. Femidom demonstrations have become part of all the Decisions for Life outreach activities. In a few workplaces, workers participating in the Campaign are negotiating that company's make femidoms available in the same way that male condoms are available. Young women have approached local clinics and pharmacies to advocate for more visibility of the femidom.

With the femidom campaign we created a more open space, a space where young women feel free to speak about sex and where young women who are using the femidom feel free to report on how they and their partners experience using the femidom. In this process young women do not speak as victims but as active agents in making decisions about their sexual lives and practices. The femidom campaign has also been an important avenue for discussing the gendered nature of HIV. With a focus on *"understanding your body, feeling proud and loving your body"*<sup>15</sup> we have been able to speak more freely about the gendered power relations that characterises the spread of HIV in South Africa. This is an important discussion as the gendered nature of the epidemic is an issue that does not feature very prominently in workplace and trade union HIV programmes.



At the beginning of 2011 we started a new phase in our sexual and reproductive rights focus with the theme: "young women and breastfeeding". A health educator from the Provincial Department of Health in Gauteng provided educational awareness about the benefits of young women breastfeeding. A number of misconceptions about breastfeeding were dealt with but importantly young women were given an opportunity to analyse the reasons for the lack of support they experience as young mothers and through the engagement felt empowered to begin to raise demands like the need for breastfeeding facilities in the workplace.

## 5.2 Young Women's Rights in the workplace

Young women workers in vulnerable forms of employment struggle to access rights like maternity protection or family responsibility leave. There is often a lack of awareness of the protection offered by the existing laws or the limitations that need to be addressed. Through the DFL workshops and discussions we have attempted to raise awareness of existing legislation and one of the young women in the Campaign best describes our approach: *"Don't give up easily, strive and fight for your rights as workers. Know the Labour Relations Act, eat and sleep the Act. Know your constitution and focus on your dreams and goals regardless of the environment you are living in."*<sup>16</sup> An important rallying point for the DFL has been campaigning for the South African Government to ratify the ILO Convention 183 dealing with maternity protection. Our starting point has been local workplace mobilisation where young women are encouraged to exercise their existing rights and through the process of collective bargaining to ensure that adequate maternity protection is extended to all women. The idea is to create a momentum from below that will help to put pressure on the South African Government to act.

15 Participant in Young women Forum in Cape Town (September 2010)

16 Interview with PhumlaXaba (February 2011)

### **5.3 Empowering young women seeking employment**

Part of our strategy has been to work with young women who are not yet employed but who are seeking employment largely within the services sector. Through focus group discussions, community forums, information forums in tertiary institutions and community libraries, we have brought together groups of young women to share their fears and dreams, to hear and experience the stories of other young women working in sectors like call centres, to learn about their legal rights but also to prepare for the challenges they are likely to face in the workplace. Many of the young women who have participated in these forums enter the forums feeling insecure, vulnerable and desperate to find employment. In this state of desperation it is these young women who are most likely to face the prospect of low paid jobs and appalling working conditions. Raising awareness and strengthening self-esteem means that the young women participating in these forums are more likely to enter the workplace aware of their rights and willing to exercise these rights.

### **5.4 Empowering young women through writing and cultural activities**

Writing their own stories, written reflections on campaign activities, press statements, reports, articles for trade union newsletters and websites and creative writing like poetry are some of the different kinds of writing we have encouraged in the Campaign. Through this process young women are writing about themselves, their own actions and thoughts and their own plans for the future. Engaging in these forms of writing is a step closer to creating public platforms where the voices of young women can be heard.

Drama, poetry, choirs, music and dance have become very much part of the Campaign. In Cape Town young women artists have shown their support for the campaign through participating in DFL activities and young women in the DFL Campaign have in turn used cultural forms as a means of expressing themselves and encouraging other young women to participate in the campaign.

## **6. Conclusion**

The Decisions for Life Trade Campaign has been an exciting and inspiring experience. As the LRS we have learnt a great deal about young women workers, their hopes, dreams and strengths. We have also learnt about the many innovative ideas and strategies young women can initiate when given the space, resources, opportunity and sense of respect and value they deserve.

This campaign is an important opportunity for trade unions to look inside of themselves, identify the challenges they need to address to make the trade union a home for young women workers while looking forward to the creativity and energy that young women workers can bring to the future of the trade union movement.

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